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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

A fractured dialectic

Søren Kierkegaard between idealism and materialism

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Award date:
2013

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Michael Burns

2014

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A FRACTURED DIALECTIC:
SØREN KIERKEGAARD BETWEEN IDEALISM AND MATERIALISM

MICHAEL O'NEILL BURNS, BA, MA

THESIS SUBMITTED TO UNIVERSITY OF DUNDEE

FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF DUNDEE
OCTOBER 2013

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like many a naïve individual in the early stages of doctoral research, I arrived in Dundee by train in August of 2008 with a perfectly clear idea of what I would include in my finished thesis and a complete confidence that my project would change very little. Luckily, my experience at Dundee afforded the opportunity to encounter individuals, texts and ideas which would afford me the privilege of a few distinct ‘crises of thought’ which forced me to re-think major aspects of both my thesis project and my philosophical orientation in general.

First I must thank those I encountered at my last stop before Dundee, the University of Nottingham. Studying under Philip Goodchild gave me the opportunity to see the real difference between thought and scholarship, and his encouragement (even as I worked in a philosophical perspective contra his own position) were crucial in teaching me the stakes of philosophical thinking. Just as important were the friendships I gained at Nottingham. Without the intellect, enthusiasm and humor of Alex Andrews, Thomas Lynch and Anthony Paul Smith I have no doubt that this thesis would not have been possible. In particular, the friendship (and intellectual challenge) offered by Anthony Paul Smith have been immense, and while he and I share differing philosophical perspectives, I would not have the passion for philosophy I do without his influence and encouragement.

To thank those at Dundee is now an odd task, as many of those who played such a crucial role in this thesis have since moved on. Both John Mullarkey and Beth Lord served as inspirations as both philosophers and human beings. I will never forget their encouragement during a particularly difficult period of my studies. Along with them, I must thank James Williams for offering an incredible model of both productivity and creativity. In particular, I am thankful to the rigor and intensity he offered at times where my own passion for thought was fading. Along with the inspiration provided by faculty, the friendship of Brian Smith was a crucial element to my time at Dundee, and if it were not for him I do not know if I ever would have learned to take Hegel’s *Logic* seriously or know precisely how one clears a dance floor at a Dundee nightclub.

For incredible supervision while at Dundee (and recently over meetings in Washington, DC) I need to thank Rachel Jones. Her kindness, support and incredibly close readings have kept this project going at times where I was contemplating giving up. Rachel has set model as both a teacher and a scholar that I can only hope to strive for in my own life.

Outside of Dundee, I need to thank those from other communities who at various times made me feel at home and encouraged my work. Gordon Marino and Cynthia Lund of the Hong Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf College provided the opportunity to immerse myself in the interesting world of Kierkegaard scholarship and afforded the opportunity to have discussions on porches and bar patios that would radically affect the course of my research. Much of this work was written while at St. Olaf, and many of the ideas presented are the fruit of encounters that took place there. One of these encounters, with Maria J. Binetti, literally helped me re-shape the trajectory of my project. If Dundee was my intellectual home, St. Olaf became a close home away from home for my work.

Of course none of this would have been possible without a network of friends and family willing to put up with almost five years of someone in the midst of the often-traumatic process of PhD research. The friendships of Philipe Navarro, Matthew ‘The Bear’ Kronz, Karl Furno and Mark Cammack were crucial to my sanity throughout this process. Thanks to Dave Mesing for not only providing intellectual inspiration and a friendship full of humor, but also for his last minute copy editing of the present work. The love and support offered by my mother, Jeanne Burns, was absolutely essential to getting me through this process. It would be no exaggeration to say that during this process she became one of my best friends.

Finally, this thesis is dedicated to the memory of my late father Thomas Emmett Burns who unexpectedly passed away during its writing. Shortly before he passed, he and I had a conversation in which his support and encouragement convinced me to stick with the PhD at a time at which the impending doom of academia left me feeling a truly Kierkegaardian despair. While I know it is largely because of him that I was able to take on this work in the first place, it is incredibly melancholic to not have him here to share this work with. This work is for him.

DECLARATION

I declare that I, Michael O'Neill Burns, am the sole author of this thesis. This work has not been previously accepted for a higher degree at any other academic institution.

Signed,


Michael O'Neill Burns

ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to consider the contemporary relevance of the philosophical and religious project of Søren Kierkegaard by offering a systematic reading of his work against the backdrop of 19th century German idealism. Along with an emphasis on a systematic interpretation of a thinker usually considered to be wholly anti-systematic in aim and orientation, I also aim to show that through developing an ontological interpretation of the work of Kierkegaard the grounds are also created to develop a social and political interpretation of his work. Ultimately, I use the ontological and political reading of Kierkegaard developed in this work to not only show the relevance of this project to contemporary materialist philosophy, but equally to show how this version of Kierkegaard is capable of offering some crucial correctives to contemporary materialism

NOTES ON SOURCES

All references to Kierkegaard's work (with the exception of *The Present Age*) are to the Princeton University Press edition of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, edited by Howard V. and Edna W. Hong. Abbreviations to these texts, which will follow quotations in parenthesis and include page numbers, follow the nomenclature below.

- CA *The Concept of Anxiety*. Trans Reidar Thomate and Albert A. Anderson. Princeton University Press, 1980.
- CI *The Concept of Irony*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna W. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1989.
- FTR *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna W. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1983.
- PF/JC *Philosophical Fragments* and *Johannes Climacus*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna W. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1985.
- SUD *The Sickness Unto Death*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna W. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1980.
- CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna W. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1992.
- TA *Two Ages*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna W. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1978
- PA *The Present Age*. Trans. Alexander Dru. New York: Harper & Row, 1962.
- FSE *For Self Examination; Judge for Yourself!* Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna W. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1900.

0: Introduction

In the past two decades there has been a drastic transition in the overall aim and theoretical orientation of continental European philosophy. At the beginning of this transitional period a certain sort of postmodernism still dominated much of the discourse of what was considered continental philosophy. This theoretical outlook, which was concerned with exploring the implications of the death of God and the end to meta-narratives and overarching metaphysical systems, inaugurated a period of discourse focused on the deconstruction of texts, the re-thinking of traditional forms of ethics, and a tendency to focus on latently theological concepts such as the neighbor, the other, alterity and the ineffable. Many of the figures traditionally associated with this tendency follow a loosely post-Heideggerian phenomenological tradition, including the likes of Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricoeur, and Emmanuel Levinas. Such figures share in common a generally post-metaphysical orientation, in which both the possibilities of speaking about and gaining access to a necessary metaphysical structure or ontological absolute are denied. Along with this, these figures share an interest in exploring the philosophical significance of traditionally theological ideas such as an absolute that lies forever beyond our own epistemological limitations.

It is thus not surprising that one of the common intellectual sources shared by many of the postmodern philosophers was Søren Kierkegaard, the anti-philosophical thinker whose religious insistence on the single individual before God stood in absolute opposition to the overarching metaphysical totalization of Hegelian logic. Many of these figures followed Heidegger in assuming that Kierkegaard had little to offer in way of a systematic ontology, but much to offer in terms of a pure existential account of human existence. If Kierkegaard was given a prominent place in postmodern philosophy, the systematic thinkers of German idealism did not fare as well. The overarching metaphysical narrative underlying the idealist tradition, which attempted to give a

systematic account of self and world, seemed to lose significance in the wake of the eulogy to classical metaphysics collectively authored by the philosophical voices of post-modernity. If the post-war European philosophical situation was largely faced with an either/or between German idealist metaphysics and existential-phenomenology, it seems that postmodern philosophy chose the later tradition.

If this serves as an accurate general description of the state of continental European philosophy at the end of the twentieth century, the first decade of the twenty-first century has begun to explore what happens on the other side of the death of metaphysics and the collapse of meta-narratives. Surprisingly, this push to explore the future of continental philosophy has begun to resemble an intellectual journey back into the key philosophical issues of the 19th century. Figures such as Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Catherine Malabou and Quentin Meillassoux have all to various extents returned to the sorts of theoretical concerns and debates that many of the dominant philosophical figures of the later half of the twentieth century fought so hard to deconstruct. If the post-Hegelian of choice for postmodernism was Kierkegaard, many of the figures of this new brand of Continental materialism seem to fall clearly on the side of Karl Marx, and in most cases, this sensibility can largely be seen as a return to Hegel and the German idealist tradition itself. But while these figures are re-opening the questions of classical metaphysics and the ways in which we can systematically conceive of the relationship between self and world, they are clearly carrying this out through a materialization of the theoretical outlook of postmodern philosophy. Rather than attempting to arrive once again at a wholly systematic and consistent metaphysical system, this new tendency aims to think through the ontological inconsistency at the heart of reality itself. So rather than assume that our inability to consistently know the absolute is a sign of the absolute gap between the individual self and the structure of reality, these figures instead push forward the idea that this inconsistency is an aspect of material reality itself.

And while many of the postmodern figures were concerned with thinking about the ethical implications of the end of metaphysics and the manner in which the death of God as traditionally conceived opened up the path to bring classically theological concepts back into the discussion; the contemporary turn in continental philosophy is marked by a clear emphasis on a certain brand of (largely Marxist-materialist) political thought and an avowed atheism which seeks to move past the theological tropes of the past century.

Following this it is unsurprising that while twentieth century postmodern philosophy brought Kierkegaard back into vogue and once again made his work a crucial point of reference for those working in the area of continental philosophy, this recent turn (which we could refer to as the materialist turn) does not seem at first glance to have much use for a figure who offered that the highest point of existence is the religious and that traditional dialectical logic should be thrown aside for the sake of a leap of faith marked by an absolute paradox. If Kierkegaard had his second act in the later half of the twentieth century, it seems to be the case that Hegel has made a triumphant return to the philosophical landscape during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Religious alterity has been replaced by a form of dialectical materialism that seems to have no more room for the theological and literary tropes of the melancholy Dane who has long been considered the absolute enemy of any brand of Hegelian logic.

Although it might seem that Kierkegaard would be disavowed by figures in the materialist turn, this has not been the case. Slavoj Žižek, arguably the most dominant figure of the recent materialist turn, dedicates an entire chapter of the book he refers to as his 'magnum opus' to a materialist reading of Kierkegaard in which he argues that contra the traditional reading, only a thin line separates the authorship of Kierkegaard from that of the German idealist tradition on one side and the dialectical materialist tradition on the other. Alain Badiou, who took over the mantle for the international face of French philosophy in the wake of the passing of Jacques Derrida, also has an

entire chapter dedicated to a consideration of Kierkegaard in his most recent systematic work. Along with that, one of the newest and most controversial voices in French philosophy, Quentin Meillassoux, has said that reckoning with the work of Kierkegaard would be constitute an ‘ultimate finality of my system’.¹ Given such proclamations, we must ask what these recent materialists are identifying in the work of Kierkegaard that the postmodern generation seemed to overlook. How can a religious and anti-metaphysical thinker serve as such a crucial point of reference for a group of thinkers concerned with thinking through questions of ontology, subjectivity and politics in an immanent and materialist fashion?

The present thesis is an attempt to argue that not only are these contemporary materialist philosophers absolutely correct in their various assertions that Kierkegaard’s thought bears a serious relation to both the systematic questions of German idealist philosophy and contemporary materialist political thought, but that in many ways they have failed to see just how much Kierkegaard has to offer contemporary materialist thought.

Along with this, the present thesis claims that the ontological and systematic nature of Kierkegaard’s thought has been largely underappreciated, and that in turn, this has obscured a radical political potential in his work which could offer relevant critique to contemporary philosophical perspectives. It will be my argument that Kierkegaard’s authorship deserves a serious place within contemporary philosophical debates, specifically regarding the political, and that the path to this political potential must necessarily begin with a serious ontological consideration of the influence of the philosophical concerns of 19th century idealism on Kierkegaard’s thought.

Broadly speaking, the structure of my argument will follow the previously mentioned claims by Žižek, the first being that there exists an “unexpected continuity between German idealism and Kierkegaard” and the other in which he claims, “only a thin, almost imperceptible line separates

¹ For Slavoj Žižek see *The Parallax View* and Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*. Meillassoux’s comment comes from personal correspondence with the author on October 2, 2010 via email.

Kierkegaard from dialectical materialism proper.”² I will not only agree with Žižek’s interpretation on these points, but I will equally claim that they are necessarily related. It is only through Kierkegaard’s proximity to the ontological and systematic concerns of German idealism that he arrives at a philosophical position with a clear similarity to the political concerns of dialectical materialism. This thesis will begin with a re-consideration of the major themes and figures of the German idealist tradition with a specific focus on how these figures and themes set a certain philosophical trajectory that serves as a crucial point of both critical response and systematic influence for the work of Kierkegaard. Along with this re-consideration of the manner in which German idealism influenced the project of Kierkegaard, I also place emphasis on the manner in which many of the aspects of idealism Kierkegaard is known to be so adamantly against (the totalizing system, the self-positing subject, the immediate beginning of philosophy) are being re-considered by contemporary scholarship. The aim is to thus not only to perform a reading which places emphasis on Kierkegaard’s idealist tendencies, but to equally see the manner in which German idealism itself already places a surprising emphasis on concepts such as existential actuality and ontological contingency which are central to contemporary materialist approaches.

This serves to set up a systematic framework by which Kierkegaard’s existential categories can be considered as properly ontological categories in an idealist fashion. This method is inspired by an essay written by John Milbank entitled ‘The Sublime in Kierkegaard’ in which he claims that ‘Kierkegaard’s apparently “existential” categories are equally ontological categories.’³ While this article was written almost two decades ago, Milbank already notices the shifting tendencies in continental philosophy, and through this places emphasis on the manner in which one can move past a postmodern interpretation of Kierkegaard without losing the unique emphasis on freedom and subjectivity. As he later argues in the same piece, it is not the case that Kierkegaard’s paradox

² Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 75.

³ John Milbank, ‘The Sublime in Kierkegaard’, *The Heythrop Journal XXXVIII* (1996), pp. 298-321. p. 304.

signifies a pure lack of epistemological capacity on the part of the subject, ‘but rather reality itself is incessantly fractured between the actual and the possible, and within this rift “subjectivity” comes to be/becomes possible.’⁴ Here Milbank pre-figures the materialist ontological turn seen in figures such as Badiou, Žižek and Meillassoux by making the argument that the sort of contingency underlying Kierkegaard’s account of subjectivity need not simply be attributed to some sort of divine transcendence standing outside of and against any coherent ontology, but instead, that this contingency is an aspect of the very structure of reality itself. In other words, we could say that Milbank is pointing to the manner in which one can reverse engineer an underlying systematic ontology out of Kierkegaard’s theory of subjectivity.⁵

In a recent essay exploring the relationship between Kierkegaard and postmodernity, Steven Shakespeare points to the same Milbank piece and notes that:

[Nevertheless], Milbank does lay down a necessary challenge for Kierkegaardian scholarship, especially as continental philosophy of religion’s love affair with the ‘other’ and with tropes of writing come under attack by new breeds of speculative thinking (such as that championed by Meillassoux). This presents a new opportunity to do the kind of work Milbank proposes, in which Kierkegaard’s existential and ontological commitments are understood in their profound interrelationship.⁶

It would be fair to say that in many senses the present thesis is an attempt to take very seriously the ‘necessary challenge for Kierkegaardian scholarship’ described above by Shakespeare. And while this work aims at a renewed political reading of Kierkegaard, I set up the grounds for this reading by first

⁴ Ibid., p. 303.

⁵ It is important to note that Milbank himself is not making any argument for a materialist reading, as his ontological reading depends on a theological ontology still grounded in a form of divine transcendence.

⁶ Shakespeare, ‘Kierkegaard and Postmodernity’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard* eds. George Pattison and John Lippitt, p. 472.

following the lead of Milbank and systematically considering Kierkegaard's existential work in explicitly ontological terms. Building on the systematic account of German idealism already offered, I outline a reading that identifies the underlying ontological structure at play in *The Concept of Anxiety* and subsequently builds upon this ontology through considering the way in which this leads to a systematic account of the spiritual self in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Along with this systematic account of the ontological structure underlying Kierkegaard's account of anxiety and despair, it is of course necessary that I consider the theological elements of these works. Following the work of both David Wood and Žižek, I present a non-theological systematic account of the religious sphere of existence which does not restrict the movement of faithful subjectivity to particularly Christian religious practice, but instead allows us to consider the way in which the individual can exist religiously in a whole host of existential commitments.

This re-consideration of the religious in wholly ontological terms allows me to then transition into a discussion of the political consequences of this ontological interpretation of the work of Kierkegaard. Through a re-casting of the religious sphere and form of existence in ontological terms I am able to arrive at an underlying account of concepts such as possibility, contingency and relationality which anchor the dynamic nature of Kierkegaard's existential categories. After this reverse engineering of the ontological out of the existential, I then consider the way in which this ontological interpretation allows us to re-conceive the political potential at play in Kierkegaard's authorship.

Rather than attempting to claim that Kierkegaard has any sort of underlying political philosophy hidden in his authorship, this reading involves a consideration of the political implications of the ontological categories previously arrived at through a consideration of the underlying basis of the existential categories. In this way, analyzing the grounds of the existential and

ethical categories allows us to consider the consequences this systematic account of reality has on our ability to think the political. In this way, ontological categories such as possibility, contingency, freedom and relationality can be conceived in a political and social sense. This is important both for a systematic reading of Kierkegaard as well as for thinking through his relation to the theories of political ontology which have become increasingly prominent in the recent materialist turn.

One of the questions that may seem obvious at this point is, why does this matter? If Kierkegaard were merely a post-Hegelian figure who pre-figures a sort of ontological structure present in contemporary materialist philosophy, why would contemporary philosophy need him? To respond to this concern, the present work shows how crucial the minimal difference between Kierkegaard's emphasis on existential actuality and the idealist concern with conceptual actuality is when considered in the light of some of the lingering problems in contemporary materialist philosophy. Through a consideration of the problematic tension between the conceptual and affective aspects of recent French materialist philosophy, I will emphasize the way in which Kierkegaard offers a means of working through this tension that allows us to think the systematic structure of both the passionate individual and overarching relational social structures which characterize political actuality. It is precisely this underlying systematic structure of Kierkegaard's thought that will prove so useful in problematizing, and eventually correcting, key elements of contemporary philosophical discourse on the ontological and political.

This is all grounded in what I refer to as Kierkegaard's *fractured dialectic*, by which I mean a dialectical system that makes fracture, rather than unity, the starting point of both thought and existence. Rather than a traditionally conceived account of Hegelian dialectics that emphasizes a unitary beginning and a final moment of closure in absolute knowing, this fractured dialectic places primary emphasis on the un-finished and open nature of subjectivity and reality. This fractured

dialectic thus offers the logical structure of idealist ontology while pre-figuring much of the existential and political emphasis of recent European philosophy.

This structure subsequently leads to political considerations as the shift from postmodernity back to systematic and materialist philosophies has been marked by a return to explicitly political thinking. While this has been a welcome return in many senses, this re-emphasis on the political has brought with it a number of new problems and issues. One of the most obvious issues has been a failure to seriously think through the existence, and internal structure, of the individual self and the reality of external social and political structures in such a way that does not collapse the one into the other. If postmodern philosophy often placed a crucial emphasis on the ethical existence of the individual while avoiding the overarching structure of classical Marxist political thought; the new materialists often seem to provide a structural account of political reality that excludes a serious consideration of the internal structure of the individual self. The final sections of this thesis will attempt to utilize Kierkegaard's fractured dialectic to point towards some solutions to what I will call the internal/external problem in the thought of Alain Badiou.

Following this it will be seen that this reading matters for historical, systematic and political reasons. Historically it allows us to consider the proximity between Kierkegaard and the German idealists in a new light that places emphasis on both the ontological nature of Kierkegaard's thought as well as on the existential nature of certain strands of idealist thought. Systematically, this work builds upon the contention made by some that there is in fact a systematic structure at the heart of Kierkegaard's anti-systematic religious thought by offering a systematic and ontological interpretation of his thought. Finally, this reading not only allows us to consider the manner in which Kierkegaard's ontological structure pre-figures much that has taken place in contemporary materialist philosophical discourse, but also, and more importantly, makes it possible to offer both

criticism and corrective to some of the shortcomings contained in the philosophies of the materialist turn.

The method that informs this thesis consists of three aspects. The first two, which have previously been outlined, are a re-consideration of the ontology of German idealism and a subsequent systematic account of Kierkegaard in light of this ontological structure. The third aspect of this work is a shift to a theoretical perspective utilized in a specific form of contemporary materialist philosophy that is referred to as transcendental materialism. While there will be detailed discussion of this recent materialist perspective throughout the thesis, it is worth briefly outlining what this perspective entails and what sort of materialism it advocates.

In basic terms, transcendental materialism is an attempt to develop an ontological structure out of a theory of free human subjectivity. Adrian Johnston has recently codified this term in his work *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*.⁷ I am using this term to refer to a philosophical sensibility which aims to articulate a materialist theory of subjectivity and which attempts to materially ground a more-than-material form of subjective freedom and activity without reference to any form of primary transcendence on the one hand, or any form of consistent naturalism on the other. In this sense materialism is simply the assertion that reality itself is 'non-all', meaning incomplete and engaged in a process of becoming. Another recent figure that could be loosely identified with a transcendental materialist perspective, Catherine Malabou, has recently described what she calls a 'reasonable materialism', which is that "the natural contradicts itself and that thought is the fruit of this contradiction."⁸ In this sense we would say that the more-than-material process of human thought is a product of the contradiction contained in matter itself, and

⁷ Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*

⁸ Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, p. 82.

thus the transcendental categories arrived at through human speculation are still grounded in material processes.

It could be said that transcendental materialism is an ontology without a metaphysics, meaning that while it attempts to offer a structural account of reality, it does not attempt to describe any form of stable and absolute metaphysical structure. Precisely inasmuch as this tendency is materialist, it avoids the trappings of the type of absolute, overarching metaphysical structure of the type that postmodern philosophy was so against. (One could even say that the transcendental materialist approach can in many ways be seen as a materialization of some of the tendencies of postmodern philosophy).

While the issue of matter will be discussed more thoroughly later in the thesis, we could say in minimal terms that in contemporary materialist philosophy the concept of matter signifies that matter is both ontologically primary, and that matter itself is marked by incompleteness. Materialism differs from naturalism in this sense as this sort of materialism considers reality as fundamentally non-all and marked by incompleteness and thus could never say that anything is either 'natural' or 'unnatural'.

By the ontological I am here referring to something distinct from the project of classical metaphysics, which aims to account for the reason or necessity that can explain the fundamental nature of reality. Instead, by ontological I mean a systematic discourse that attempts to give a structural account of existence and our ability to understand this structure. If a coherent metaphysics needs to account for some sort of necessity that is primary and subsequently orders being; the ontological is here understood - given that other understandings of the ontological are possible - as that which acknowledges the primacy of contingency and a lack of necessity.

Ultimately I hope that the perspective of transcendental materialism will make it possible for me to present a systematic and non-theological interpretation of the thought of Kierkegaard that does not simply ignore the centrality of religious categories, but instead, offers a way to think through the religious in a wholly immanent and materialist fashion. In this way I hope to demonstrate that this reading of Kierkegaard can show why philosophy of religion need not be afraid of materialism, and equally, materialism need not practice a sort of reactionary atheism in the face of the religious. Along with this, I hope to emphasize the manner by which this systematic reading of Kierkegaard could serve as a needed corrective to some of the lingering philosophical issues in recent materialism.

This thesis will proceed as follows:

In chapter one, 'Idealism before Kierkegaard', I aim to accomplish two goals, each one related to one of the dual aims of the work as a whole. In one respect I am arguing that one cannot attempt a systematic and philosophical interpretation of the work of Kierkegaard without placing his authorship against the background of German idealism. Through this historical analysis I show how much of the systematic character of Kierkegaard's thought necessitates taking seriously the influence of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. With Fichte, Kierkegaard provides an account, and subsequent critique of, subjective immediacy and self-positing, eventually arguing that the self is the very contradiction between a finite and infinite element. With Schelling, Kierkegaard attempts to focus on the concept of actuality, in his case meaning that the project of systematic philosophy can never simply begin from any sort of pre-experiential logical grounds. Finally, following Hegel, Kierkegaard follows the systematic structure of a logic grounded in the movement inaugurated through contradiction.

In another respect, this emphasis on placing Kierkegaard in an idealist context allows me to

situate Kierkegaard in the context of contemporary materialism, much of which consists of a materialist re-articulation of the German idealist tradition. Thus, I end the chapter by briefly outlining the manner in which contemporary materialism has come to re-appropriate the projects of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel by identifying the ‘materialist core’ in each of their idealist projects.

Chapters two and three follow the account of idealism given in chapter one to outline a systematic structure at the heart of Kierkegaard’s authorship. Chapter two, ‘Anxiety and Ontology’, identifies the implicit ontological structure at the heart of Kierkegaard’s project through an analysis of his work *The Concept of Anxiety*. By approaching this text through considering the ontological implications of his critique of immediacy as it is found in idealist philosophy I highlight the manner in which the founding moment of Kierkegaard’s systematic thought is neither the certainty of the absolute self-positing subject, nor the certainty of the existence of an objective truth such as God. Rather, the founding moment of Kierkegaard’s project, and more importantly existence, is the anxious awareness of the abyss that infinitely precedes all existential projects and logical systems.

After outlining these ontological grounds, I move on to analyze how this ontology of the *Afgrund* [abyss] leads Kierkegaard to emphasize a particular notion of freedom. In this notion, freedom is never just a pure and absolute freedom, but instead is a dynamic entanglement of opposed elements. This entanglement signifies the fact that the particular human being always relates to the infinite and finite aspects in her self, while then relating herself to the finite and infinite aspects of the external world.

This same tension carries over in my discussion of good and evil in which I emphasize both the element of contingency at the heart of the self and reality in Kierkegaard’s work, while also showing the ethical and social implications of this emphasis. From here I make one of the most explicit conceptual developments in the work by arguing for what I call the fractured dialectic at the heart of Kierkegaard’s project. I outline a clear ontological project that consists of a dialectical structure that

is inherently fractured by the pure contingency of the abyss [*Afgrund*]. Thus, this dialectic neither begins from a position of absolute unity nor aims at an eventual synthesis. I conclude the chapter with some initial remarks on the social and political possibilities of this ontology.

Chapter three, ‘Spirit and Society’, builds on the ontological foundation outlined in the previous chapter to exemplify how this ontological structure leads to the emergence of a particular form of consciousness through the development of freedom, or spirit. While developing an anthropology that builds upon the previously outlined ontology, this chapter also brings up the crucial question of whether or not it is possible to have a non-theological reading of Kierkegaard that does not deflate the foundational aspects of his thought. To accomplish this, I consider the implications of an ontological interpretation of God that allows me to avoid falling back into the theological. I argue that God can signify pure ontological possibility, and that the properly religious mode of existence has to do with relating to existential projects in a mode of possibility. This then leads to a consideration of both deconstructive and materialist attempts that have previously been made to reckon with the theological aspects of Kierkegaard’s thought. I conclude this chapter by considering the connection between the psychological and the social which further outlines how the ontology and anthropology outlined in chapters two and three opens a political interpretation of Kierkegaard’s thought.

Chapter four follows the progression from the ontological, to the anthropological, to the social by directly addressing the political aspects of Kierkegaard’s thought. By taking the conceptual claims made thus far and applying them to one of Kierkegaard’s only overtly political texts, *Two Ages*, I am able to draw out more precisely what a Kierkegaardian political ontology would look like. Along with this, I argue that for Kierkegaard existence never boils down to an either/or choice between the single individual *or* the social collective, but rather, that a proper collective necessitates self-relating individuals, and that properly relational individuals must relate to projects external to

their own subjectivity. This is crucial not only to my aim of arguing for a political interpretation of the work of Kierkegaard, but also because this reading will allow me to outline the stakes of a Kierkegaardian critique of contemporary materialist philosophy.

In chapter five I make a shift from focusing wholly on the project of Kierkegaard to considering the development of recent materialist philosophies and the manner in which they relate to the previously outlined fractured dialectic. I begin with an analysis of the late work of Jean-Paul Sartre, focusing on the manner in which his materialist project both pre-figures much of recent European materialism and shares an uncanny resemblance to the political reading of Kierkegaard outlined in the previous chapter. After this I consider the project of one of Sartre's intellectual heirs, Alain Badiou. Through considering the ontology, theory of subjectivity and political ontology of Badiou's philosophical system, I argue that his philosophy ends up being the most thoroughly Kierkegaardian of the contemporary materialists. This chapter concludes by using the ontological and political reading of Kierkegaard developed throughout this work to offer a critical corrective to contemporary materialist philosophy. It is my contention that Kierkegaard's ability to theorize both the internal constitution and external activity of the subject provides a useful framework for a brand of materialism that often risks forgetting the individual human subject.

I conclude the work by briefly considering the concept of love, which serves as the crucial trope in the work I argue represents the final moment in Kierkegaard's systematic project, *Works of Love*. It is my contention that love acts as the un-synthesizable concept which serves as the infinite grounds on both sides of his fractured dialectic, and which allows Kierkegaard to be considered in relation to both the Christian tradition and contemporary materialism, which has also placed emphasis on the ontological and political importance of love as an orienting concept. Overall this thesis aims to present a systematic picture of Kierkegaard's thought that places him in dialogue with

both 19th century idealism and 21st century materialism for the sake of casting new light on the social and political relevance of his unique brand of religious existentialism.

1: Idealism Before Kierkegaard

1.0 Introduction

The relationship between Søren Kierkegaard and the main figures of German idealism (Fichte-Schelling-Hegel) has been historically cast in an extremely one-sided fashion. For example, Fichte, the figure most responsible for charting the idealist trajectory that would come to define the projects of both Schelling and Hegel, and who serves as a critical point of reference in the second half of Kierkegaard's dissertation, warrants very little mention in the secondary literature on Kierkegaard.⁹ Schelling has been largely dismissed as a serious influence on the work of Kierkegaard due to the negative comments Kierkegaard left in his journals after attending Schelling's inaugural Berlin lectures in 1841-42.¹⁰ While the previously mentioned figures, Fichte and Schelling, have more or less been brushed aside as figures playing a substantial role in the development of Kierkegaard's thought, the literature on Hegel and Kierkegaard has grown consistently throughout the later half of the 20th century. The problem with this body of literature is that it is largely concerned with perpetuating a reading in which an irrevocable gap exists between the totalizing project of Hegel's dialectical system and the ethico-religious project of Kierkegaard which emphasizes the uniqueness of the individual human subject which stands in opposition to 'the system.' Equally problematic has been the tendency of Kierkegaard scholars to take his reading of Hegel far too literally and use this as the hermeneutic guide for their own interpretations of Hegel. The important question lingering in

⁹ At present, the secondary literature in English linking the projects of Kierkegaard and Fichte is extremely limited. Michelle Kosch has published one article on this issue, 'Fichte as Kierkegaard's Ethicist', and David Kangas has discussed the relationship with Fichte in his book *Kierkegaard's Instant* as well as in his article 'Kierkegaard and Fichte' which appeared in a volume on the German influence on Kierkegaard's thought.

¹⁰ Exceptions to this lack of scholarship include Michelle Kosch's *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Kierkegaard, and Schelling* as well as the volume *Kierkegaard und Schelling*, which contains essays in both German and English.

the wake of the literature on the Hegel-Kierkegaard relationship is inevitably one of ‘whose Hegel?’ and ‘which Kierkegaard?’¹¹

While for the most part the crucial relationship between German idealism and Søren Kierkegaard has tended to evade the majority of those working under the general rubric of Kierkegaard scholarship, many figures not generally associated with the work of Kierkegaard have made brief, but crucial, comments on the necessity of re-thinking this relationship. In his important volume of lectures *Between Kant and Hegel*, German philosopher Dieter Henrich notes that it is “impossible to understand any basic doctrine of Kierkegaard without knowing both Hegel and Fichte.”¹² Paul Ricoeur, in an essay entitled ‘Philosophy After Kierkegaard’ comments that “at any rate a fresh interpretation of Kierkegaard must certainly entail a reconsideration of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel himself.”¹³ While Ricoeur’s article provides a programmatic overview more so than it does a step-by-step argument, he makes it clear that any future philosophical engagement with Kierkegaard must necessarily entail his being read within the philosophical context of German idealism, and that this reading can equally enrich our understanding of the idealists.

In a sense then, my current intention is to consider Henrich and Ricoeur’s comments as dual aspects of a method of re-considering the relationship between the writings of Kierkegaard and the philosophical project of German idealism. With Henrich, I think it is absolutely crucial to note the manner in which a rigorous philosophical understanding of the work of Kierkegaard necessitates that one takes seriously the projects of Fichte and Hegel, as well as Schelling. This is not for the sake

¹¹ The most important study to break from this tradition is Jon Stewart’s *Kierkegaard’s Relation to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) in which Stewart forcefully argues that much of what seems to be direct attacks against Hegel in Kierkegaard’s writing are actually aimed at many of Kierkegaard’s teachers, pastors, and colleagues in the Danish intellectual scene of his time. Another crucial voice in the careful re-consideration of this relationship is Argentinean philosopher Maria J. Binnetti, whose recent articles in English put forth the bold claim that Kierkegaard actually practices a thoroughly Hegelian form of metaphysics, with the crucial difference being that he begins with the perspective of particular existence rather than universal logic.

¹² Dieter Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 4. Henrich comments on the similarities between Fichte and Kierkegaard on p. 19, and Hegel on p. 20.

¹³ Paul Ricoeur, ‘Philosophy After Kierkegaard’ in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader* eds. Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 11.

of undermining the uniqueness of Kierkegaard's own project, but rather so that one can see the manner in which Kierkegaard was deeply intertwined with many of the dominant philosophical debates of his age. In the second sense, following Ricoeur, it is crucial to note that this re-consideration of Kierkegaard does not simply imply that we evaluate his project in terms of the established canon of German idealism, but rather, that we equally re-consider the traditional readings of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. Thus, the aim of the present chapter should be seen as an attempt to briefly chart out this sort of reading to set up the rest of the present thesis.

A final and unexpected voice in the rallying cry to re-consider the philosophical relevance of Søren Kierkegaard through a consideration of his engagement with German idealism is Slavoj Žižek. Žižek, whose own work can best be summarized as a Lacanian and Marxist re-interpretation of the ontology of German idealism, makes the surprising move of dedicating almost an entire chapter of his 'magnum opus', *The Parallax View*, to his own Hegelian re-reading of Kierkegaard. In this chapter Žižek focuses on what he sees to be the "unexpected continuity between German Idealism and Kierkegaard."¹⁴ Žižek goes on in this chapter to re-consider Kierkegaard's relationship to Hegel in light of Žižek's own interpretation of Hegel, one in which the flight of the owl of Minerva does not signify the closure of the system, but rather reads contingency back into the seemingly necessary events of the past.¹⁵

While the primary philosophical aim of my thesis is to develop an ontological and political reading of the works of Søren Kierkegaard, it is my claim that unless one reads Kierkegaard's works

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), p. 75.

¹⁵ This interpretation of Hegel, in which there is no final consistent consummative moment of the dialectic, is also represented to varying degrees by the work of Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic* trans. Lisabeth During (London: Routledge, 2005); Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Verso, 2009); Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2010); Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative* trans. Jason E. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Fredric Jameson, *The Hegel Variations: On the Phenomenology of Spirit* (London: Verso, 2010); Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008); and David Gray Carlson, *A Commentary on Hegel's Science of Logic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

as critically responding to the figures and shared problems of the German idealist tradition, a rigorous ontological and political reading of his work is destined to fall short. In light of this, I will begin this thesis with an overview of the figures and issues of German idealism that I identify to be primary in producing a critical response from Kierkegaard. It is worth noting that in the discussion of each of these figures attention will be given specifically to the aspects of their work that Kierkegaard seems to be responding to at various junctures, and in particular, providing an account of their work that is in line with Kierkegaard's own interpretation. Because much of Kierkegaard's knowledge of idealism was transmitted to him through his teachers at the University of Copenhagen, and various texts that were made available to him during his studies, his depiction of the issues framing early 19th century German philosophy is in no way comprehensive and in many ways his reading lacks the interpretive subtlety that one would desire. Nevertheless, the slower pace of cultural and intellectual dissemination in the 19th century meant that during his studies at the University of Copenhagen, both theologians and philosophers were deeply engaged in the issues of early 19th century German Idealism, and thus both the systematic framework and lingering problems of this tradition would have been deeply influential in Kierkegaard's own philosophical development.¹⁶

In this thesis I will be reading Kierkegaard's own thought in terms of his critical reaction to the theories of immediacy, reflection, and practical philosophy present in the work of the idealists. My reason for this is that I intend to show that Kierkegaard's authorship can be read as an account of the subject's journey from a break with immediacy (which brings with it the emergence of freedom and the experience of anxiety), to the opening of reflection (leading to despair), to the necessity of action, or practical philosophy (which is the overcoming of reflection's despair), and finally returning to a higher immediacy in the work of love. Throughout this interpretation I will be

¹⁶ This can be seen in Kierkegaard's doctoral thesis, *The Concept of Irony*, which follows a largely Hegelian structure in the first half, and a second half dedicated to a discussion of 'Irony after Fichte'.

referring to the idealist figures as representing both the problems to which Kierkegaard is critically responding, as well as providing the concepts which serve as the inspiration to Kierkegaard's creative attempt to move past idealism. The aim of the present chapter will be to provide a point of reference for the conceptual interaction with idealism that will take place in the subsequent chapters.

This chapter will proceed as follows. First, I will begin with a discussion of J.G. Fichte, the earliest representative of the post-Kantian idealist position. Of primary importance in my discussion of Fichte will be presenting his account of the immediacy of the self-positing subject as it is presented in the 1794 version of the *Wissenschaftslehre* (*The Science of Knowledge*), focusing particularly on the absolute immediacy of this self-positing subject which Kierkegaard would go on to identify as his critical point of departure in both the second half of *The Concept of Irony* and in the early sections of *The Concept of Anxiety*. After outlining both Fichte's early theory of subjectivity as well as his notion of the absolute immediacy of the grounds of reflection, I will move on to briefly discussing *The Vocation of Man*, a text intended for a popular audience which was written after the atheism controversy caused a considerable amount of damage to Fichte's academic reputation. Finally, I will consider recent interpretations that argue that when considering the whole of his authorship Fichte is not, in fact, the absolute subjective idealist that Kierkegaard and others accuse him of being.

After discussing Fichte, I will move on to a consideration of Schelling. The starting point of this discussion will be an account of Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*, in which he presents a theory of subjectivity which begins from the same absolute immediacy with which Fichte grounds his early *Wissenschaftslehre*. I will then outline the break made between the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, and Schelling's 1809 essay *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. Paying attention to this shift in Schelling's philosophy will serve our interpretation of Kierkegaard in two respects; first, it will show how Schelling's break with Fichte follows a similar line of critique as that of Kierkegaard, and second, Schelling's grounding of both human freedom and the capacity for

good and evil in the *urgrund* of an absolute indifference further paves the way for the account of freedom and evil in Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*, and subsequently leads into the development of reflection in *The Sickness Unto Death*.

Finally, this chapter will briefly outline what I will refer to as an 'open' interpretation of the work of G.W.F Hegel which has been developed in recent scholarship. The point of this discussion will be to show the way in which much of Hegel's work can be seen as a systematization of the idealist systems that came before (i.e., Fichte and Schelling) more so than it is a unique system in its own right. Along with this, I will consider the manner in which this 'open' reading of Hegel has already been used to re-consider the traditional systematic reading of the relationship between Hegel and Kierkegaard and emphasize systematic elements of Kierkegaard's thought along with existential elements of Hegel's.

While one may at this point wonder why a thesis purporting to present an ontological and political reading of Kierkegaard through considering his work as a response to German idealism has yet to mention to socio-political aspects of German idealism itself, this question will not garner much importance in the subsequent chapters. In the ontological and political reading I develop hereafter, the socio-political aspects of Kierkegaard's thought emerge precisely through the ontological response and critique of idealism rather than through his direct critique of the practical and political philosophies offered by idealism. Put otherwise, it is not a critique of the political philosophy of German idealism that leads to Kierkegaard's socio-political importance, but rather his critiques of the theorization of both immediacy and reflection amongst the German idealists that leads to an emphasis on action and a break with reflection that enables me to develop a socio-political interpretation of Kierkegaard. Thus, while the first half of the thesis will continue to build on largely ontological and speculative questions, this will be for the sake of underpinning the social and political discussions that will make up a majority of the second half of this thesis.

1.1 J.G. FICHTE

It could rightly be argued that Fichte was the first philosopher to develop a systematic post-Kantian Idealism. While some, such as Reinhold, had published attempts at their own Kantian systems, Fichte was the first to move firmly beyond the Kantian paradigm by providing both a systematic account for the primary unity of both theoretical and practical philosophy (the lack of which he thought to be one of the primary shortcomings of Kant), as well as an account of the self positing absolute subject which did away with the Kantian thing-in-itself. At issue for Fichte was the establishment of a primary principle by which philosophical speculation could properly begin, and a principle that would provide the grounds for both the theoretical and practical aspects of critical philosophy. He opens Part I of the 1794 *Science of Knowledge* by stating that “our task is to *discover* the primordial, absolutely unconditioned first principle of all human knowledge. This can be neither *proved* nor *defined*, if it is to be an absolutely primary principle.”¹⁷ As we will later see, this desire to discover an absolute and immediate beginning for human knowledge is what Kierkegaard will come to critique so fervently in both *The Concept of Irony* and in the opening pages of *The Concept of Anxiety*.

Before providing a summary of the conceptual developments made by Fichte in *The Science of Knowledge* (hereafter *SK*) there are some structural and methodological aspects of this work worth considering. The first of these involves the structure of the 1794 *SK*, which is set into three parts: Fundamental Principles of the Entire Science of Knowledge, Foundation of Theoretical Knowledge, and Foundation of Knowledge of the Practical. In the first section Fichte provides an account of the principles that will be at the heart of both the theoretical and practical aspects of his philosophy, the main principle being the self-positing I, or, the self identical I=I. Once he establishes this primary

¹⁷ J.G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge* trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 93.

principle, he moves on to outline how this principle operates in the speculative endeavour of theoretical knowledge. After this, once theoretical knowledge can go no further, Fichte concludes the work with an account of how this primary principle functions in its practical role as the striving activity that is the self.

While much time could be spent charting the argument of this text, the important aspect for the argument of this thesis is ‘Part I: Fundamental Principles of the Entire Science of Knowledge’, as this is the point in the text where Fichte provides the most straightforward account of the primary principle of his entire system, which is the activity of the self positing ‘I’. This is crucial for the present argument as the idea of the self positing ‘I’ as the foundation, or beginning, of knowledge is the aspect of Fichte’s early system that Kierkegaard takes serious issue with.

In the first introduction to the *SK*, Fichte makes clear that his intention is to discover the absolute starting point of philosophy through a radical turn inward, opening this introduction by stating:

Attend to yourself: turn your attention away from everything that surrounds you and towards your inner life; this is the first demand that philosophy makes of its disciple. Our concern is not with anything that lies outside of you, but only with yourself.¹⁸

It is clear from the outset that Fichte’s idealism searches for its practical and theoretical unity with a turn inward, rather than an appeal to a thing-in-itself that is indefinitely ‘out there’, forever removed from the access of the subject. Fichte goes on to note, “this idealism proceeds from a single fundamental principle of reason, which it demonstrates directly in consciousness.”¹⁹ This principle which Fichte’s idealism proceeds from must be one that is immediate to consciousness, rather than

¹⁸ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

being the product of some prior state of reflection. While in this introduction Fichte proclaims this single, fundamental principle upon which reason is founded, he does not elaborate on what this principle actually *is* until Part I of the main text.

In this section Fichte sets out to explain what this absolutely posited foundation is; in short, it is the $I=I$, as absolute, immediate, self-identity.²⁰ This 'I' is in-itself the absolute activity of self-positing, which rests on no ground outside itself. Thus it is absolutely posited, and founded only on itself, and is nothing but a pure activity. This self posits itself absolutely.²¹ He goes on to complicate this picture of the immediacy of the self-positing subject by showing how this subject is not merely a unified, or consistent, entity. Rather, the 'I' contains within itself both 'self' and 'not-self' (or, 'I' and '¬I'). This seems, at first glance, to pose quite a problem, as the goal of Fichte's project is a single unified principle from which philosophy can begin. He goes on to show how 'self' can be equated with reality, or being, and the 'not-self' with non-being, or negation. Their relationship thus becomes one of mutual limitation, where 'self' represents pure infinity, and 'not-self' represents finitude.²²

Fichte goes on to point out that 'self' and 'not-self' are immediately unified in the 'I', and thus distinguished from each other only through the act of reflection.²³ This seeming contradiction between 'self' and 'not-self' is thus grounded in the priority of self-positing consciousness, as both are aspects of this unified and self-positing consciousness. Only in reflection are these two aspects of the 'I' differentiated; 'self' as reality, 'not-self' as the negation of this reality. He later goes on to associate 'self' with pure activity, and the 'not-self' with the pure passivity, and thus all activity is a negation of passivity, while passivity is a negation of pure activity.

It is useful to consider this the position of absolute immediacy associated with Fichte, in which there is nothing prior to the 'I', but instead the whole of thought rests on this primary activity.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 96.

²¹ Ibid., p. 97.

²² Ibid., p. 108.

²³ Ibid., pp. 108, 112.

We will later see why Kierkegaard found Fichte's account of immediate self-consciousness as its own grounding inadequate on both theological and philosophical grounds, as well as Fichte's own re-positioning of the 'I' in his later system, in which it could be argued that Fichte finally accounts for something 'other' than the absolute 'I' which both precedes its emergence and continues to exist as a negative remainder within the activity of the 'I'.

Fichte's philosophical project went through a number of changes and modifications between the 1794 presentation of the *SK* and the 1800 publication of *The Vocation of Man*. Many of these modifications were a result of the atheism controversy that led to Fichte's losing his position at Jena and being forced to essentially re-build his professional and intellectual reputation. One of the ways he went about this was through publishing a work of public (or popular) philosophy, intended to appeal to a wide audience rather than being written for the practitioners of the new critical, or speculative, philosophy. While much more could be said about the six-year period between the early presentation of the *SK* and *The Vocation of Man*, the reason for jumping ahead in this investigation is due to the fact that we know for certain that Kierkegaard himself read, and was influenced by, this text.²⁴ Along with the historical relevance of Kierkegaard's own relation to and reading of this text, it is important in so much as its tone and intended audience place it in close proximity to Kierkegaard's own ethico-religious style, in both his pseudonymous works as well as the Christian discourses he published under his own name. For the sake of the forthcoming discussion of Kierkegaard it is worth considering how a brief discussion of this text shows a side of Fichte that seems remarkably similar to Kierkegaard's own insistence on the necessity of action and striving in the religious existence of the individual subject. While there will not be any substantial discussion of this similarity here, this summary of Fichte's ethico-practical writing will allow us to move on to a

²⁴ For more on this see David Kangas, 'J.G. Fichte: from transcendental ego to Existence' in *Kierkegaard and His German Contemporaries*, ed. Jon Stewart (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009)

more thorough comparative discussion in later chapters of this thesis in which I will discuss the practical and socio-political elements of Kierkegaard's own thought.

Fichte structures this work into three books: Book One is concerned with 'Doubt', Book Two with 'Knowledge', and Book Three with 'Faith'.²⁵ Each book is a practical, or ethical, reading of a theoretical philosophical position. Book one presents the practical outcomes of the brand of determinist naturalism Fichte associates with Spinoza. Book two is meant to represent the absolute idealism, and potential scepticism, associated with the Kantian position. Book three, faith, ends the work with a practical presentation of Fichte's own philosophical position. At each juncture Fichte is attempting to show how a particular philosophical outlook that was prominent during his era leads to a particular lived outcome and practical philosophy for the individual who believes in that form of thought. In the preface to this work Fichte clearly differentiates the intention of this work from his previous attempts at the *SK* when he states:

I still need to remind a few readers that the "I" who speaks in the book is by no means the author. Rather, the author wishes that the reader may come to see himself in this "I"; that the reader may not simply relate to what is said here as he would to history, but rather that while reading he will actually converse with himself, deliberate back and forth, deduce conclusions, make decisions like his representative in the book, and through his own work and reflection, purely out of his own resources, develop and build within himself the philosophical disposition that is presented to him in this book merely as a picture.²⁶

²⁵ The outline of the work and section titles in themselves seem an obvious parallel to the structure of much of Kierkegaard's own work.

²⁶ J.G. Fichte, *The Vocation of Man* trans. Peter Preuss (Cambridge: Hackett, 1987), p. 2.

Fichte is here inviting the reader to see himself in the work, and thus realize how his own philosophical tendencies lead to a particular way to life. This seems to link with Fichte's earlier insistence that "what sort of philosophy one chooses depends, therefore, on what sort of man one is."²⁷ In this text he is arguing even more explicitly for the link between philosophical systems and practical outcomes, but rather than the somewhat murky confusion between the primacy of the theoretical or practical which is present in *SK*, in the *Vocation of Man* Fichte is clear that "practical reason is the root of all reason."²⁸ At this point one can see a strong similarity between Kierkegaard's method of attempting to elicit a subjective response from those reading his texts through the method of 'indirect communication' and the aims of Fichte's text.

As I previously noted, Book One is entitled 'Doubt' and explores the practical outcomes of Spinoza's naturalism in the life of the individual. Fichte begins this book by posing the fundamental question of existence, which for him is, "what am I myself, and what is my vocation?"²⁹ According to Fichte, Spinozist naturalism places one in a situation of absolute determinism, in which all things are placed in a line of strict necessity, and by the shifting of even one grain of sand a change is affected in all parts of the whole.³⁰ Fichte connects a certain form of despair and a feeling of helplessness to the one existing in a state of doubt, stating that "I myself, along with everything I call mine, are a link in this chain of strict necessity"³¹ and "whatever I am and become I am and become necessarily, and it is impossible for me to be anything else."³² Fichte is here attempting to show how this lack of freedom and realization of a strict and natural necessity leaves the individual in a state of despair, unable to do anything to change their situation, and painfully aware of their lack of freedom. Before ending this book Fichte states that "the system of freedom satisfies my heart; the opposite

²⁷ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, p. 16.

²⁸ Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, p. 79.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

³¹ Ibid., p. 11.

³² Ibid., p. 14.

system kills and annihilates it.”³³ Thus, this system of strict naturalism has the outcome in existence of annihilating the heart of the one who derives their practical philosophy from this theoretical position.

Book two, ‘Knowledge’, lays out the practical implications of Fichte’s interpretation of the Kantian project. Fichte structures this book as a dialogue between the ‘I’ and spirit, in which spirit attempts to convince the ‘I’ that absolute idealism is a way out of the “depression and dread” caused by the previous system of naturalism.³⁴ In the subsequent dialogue, spirit, which represents the problematic scepticism Fichte sees as being the necessary outcome of the Kantian thing-in-itself, Fichte takes the ‘I’ through a dialogue which amounts to a process of reflection that turns out to be unending. Rather than the system presented in the first book in which the ‘I’ becomes convinced that it is merely a link in a necessary and natural chain of events, the system presented through this dialogue leaves the ‘I’ trapped in the reflecting despair of absolute scepticism, in which it realizes it cannot actually know anything, and knowledge is thus forever outside its grasp. By the end of this book the ‘I’ is left with a new form of despair, but rather than being the despair of absolute determinism, it is the despair of an absolute scepticism, in which one is forever trapped in a circle of reflection.

The final section of the book, ‘Faith’, presents Fichte’s own version of practical philosophy, one that he sees as grounded in the project of the *SK* that I have previously outlined. Early in this section Fichte states, “your vocation is not merely to know, but to act according to your knowledge.”³⁵ He here seems to set out the program for his ethico-religious ideal, mainly that proper human existence is not to be a merely speculative endeavour into the nature of knowledge, or knowledge about reality as it exists in-itself, but rather a practical endeavour grounded in an initial

³³ Ibid., p. 24.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 67.

theoretical knowledge. While in the opening section of *SK* we have seen that for Fichte the 'I' is essentially its own activity, in this text Fichte argues that not only are we activity, but that we exist for activity.³⁶ Existence for Fichte is thus not something static, or immediate, but rather the process by which one becomes something for and through their own activity.³⁷

Fichte's idea of an ethical existence involves the positing of an ethical ideal by the 'I', the forming of a project by which one hopes to bring about this ideal, and a subsequent process by which this ideal is worked for. Thus, the self is faced with the objectivity of the world (or, the non-self) and the ethical drive for a better world provides the active project of overcoming this objectivity in a subjective project aimed at attaining the ideal.³⁸ Fichte argues in the book on faith that life itself "flows towards this better state of things"³⁹, and that the life of faith is able to transform the paralyzing despair exemplified in the previous two books ('Doubt' and 'Knowledge') into a positive motivation, as that which is capable of driving the oppressed to strive towards the creation of a better world.⁴⁰ He goes on to argue that will is the first link in a spiritual chain given through faith, and that subsequently act, or activity, is the first link in the material chain which is the will's activity on matter. Or, the self's activity towards the not-self. Fichte then uses this concept of will to develop a theory of unity amongst all individuals, as "this will unites me with itself; it unites me with all finite beings like me and is the general mediator between all of us."⁴¹

Fichte continues to develop this notion of will into a universal concept which serves as the 'common spiritual source' of humanity which 'builds the world' in and through individual minds.⁴² Thus this form of will is the common spiritual source of humanity, and the power that allows

³⁶ Ibid., p. 68.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ While this seems to be merely an aspect of Fichte's practical philosophy, in his study *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), Fredrick Beiser argues that this drive to transform the objective world into an ethical ideal is the main goal of Fichte's overall project.

³⁹ Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, p. 81.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 107.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 109-111.

mediated relations between individuals to emerge. According to Fichte, “all our life is its life.”⁴³ In what seems like an extremely unexpected move when considered in light of the previously considered *SK*, Fichte is here developing a sort of speculative theology, in which faith allows access to a transcendental life which works through humanity to achieve its own ends. Rather than being *a* self, this conception of life seems to be the *absolute* self that utilizes individual selves for projects that seek to transform the finitude of the absolute non-self. At this point we see a shift in Fichte’s overall project which is acutely observed in the translators introduction to this work in which it is argued that “no, the task is not to replace one theoretical philosophy with another one, but to get out of philosophy altogether.”⁴⁴ In this sense faith seems to be the necessary middle term Fichte places between theory and action.

While one could read this shift in Fichte’s work as a collapse of philosophy back into theology, Slavoj Žižek has recently offered a reading of this work that accounts for this split as something immanent to the act of philosophy itself. According to Žižek, “the discord between our knowledge and our ethico-practical engagement is irreducible, one cannot bring them together in a complete ‘world view.’”⁴⁵ In Žižek’s reading, this irreducible split between theoretical knowledge and practical engagement is a direct consequence of the absolutization of the split between self and non-self that Fichte introduced in the *SK*. To again quote Žižek:

When I (finite subject) ‘posit’ an ideal/unattainable practical goal, the finite reality outside me appears as ‘not-self’, as an obstacle to my goal to be overcome, transformed. In the wake of Kant this is Fichte’s ‘primacy of practical reason’: the way I perceive reality depends on

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. IX-XI

⁴⁵ Žižek, ‘Fichte’s Laughter’ in *Mythology, Madness and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism*, p. 140.

my practical project [...] the obstacle is not an obstacle to me as an entity, but to me as engaged in realizing a project.⁴⁶

Let me briefly provide an example of how this would look in practical terms. Let us say, for example, that one decided to train for a cross-country race. As soon as the self commits to this project (completing the race) they immediately begin to perceive reality in a different light. Whereas before this project was posited, things such as hills, rocks, creeks and other rugged terrain were little more than natural elements in a generally pleasing landscape, they now become the specific obstacles that stand between the individual and his projected goal. To take this one step further, this project alters the way that the self perceives even himself, as his own fatigue, lack of proper form and the effects of previous injuries on present physical performance all become goals to be overcome. Thus, practical reason is primary for Fichte because our practical projects affect the way we perceive not only external reality, but also shape the way in which we perceive ourselves. In the previous example ‘self’ is the individual attempting to complete the cross-country race, while ‘not-self’ is the objectivity contained in not only the difficult elements of the natural landscape but equally the aspects of the individual’s own body which pose a threat to the completion of this goal.

This development pre-figures a change that will take place in Fichte’s post-Jena system, in which the ‘not-self’ does not simply represent the passivity or negation contained within the ‘self’ in the unity of the self-positing ‘I’, but rather, it represents the remainder of something that has come before the positing of the ‘I’ and which will forever serve as the objectivity the ‘self’ must struggle to overcome.⁴⁷ This aspect of Fichte’s project is what Žižek has referred to as the possibility of ‘Fichte’s materialism’. Along with this, one could reasonably deduce that if there is always some ‘not-

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 155.

⁴⁷ While it has not come up in our explication thus far, a further elaboration of Fichte’s notion of the *Anstoss*, or ‘check’, will become crucial for a reading of the self in Fichte as not absolutely immediate.

self' which comes absolutely before the positing of the absolute 'I', then Fichte can no longer be accused of the absolute ego-logy that often serves to represent the worst tendencies within idealism.

Thus his ethico-practical project (as outlined in *The Vocation of Man*) serves as the practical system corresponding to the developments taking place in his theoretical philosophy. Because there is always something 'other' that is prior to the immediacy of the 'I', the 'I' must always be an activity striving towards a goal that necessitates the projected overcoming of objective 'checks'.

While the topic will be covered in more detail in the next chapter, we can see that much of Kierkegaard's critical stance on Fichte depends on a reading that takes the 1794 present of the *Science of Knowing* to be exemplary of his overall position. This explains Kierkegaard's critical stance towards the theoretical presentation of Fichte's self-positing 'I'. The crucial point, however, is that Kierkegaard's seeming agreement with the ethico-practical project developed by Fichte in *The Vocation of Man* comes right as Fichte is beginning to modify his theoretical position, and in particular the notion of immediacy which Kierkegaard took as his critical starting point. Thus, Kierkegaard's critique of Fichte makes perfect sense when read in light of his Jena period writings, but if we read Kierkegaard's critiques in light of Fichte's later presentation of his system, we notice that Fichte's system seems to move beyond many of the problems identified by Kierkegaard. In essence, much of the position Kierkegaard develops by way of his critique of Fichte ends up making some of the same points Fichte develops himself in his post-Jena period. Before moving on, it is worth once again considering the different interpretations of Fichte's philosophy at play in the contemporary literature to further note the way in which we could easily conceive of Kierkegaard as both for and against his project.

As we have seen, the shifts in Fichte's philosophical system led to some difficulty in pinning down something that could simply be described as 'Fichte's philosophy'. Instead, interpretations vary from readings in which Fichte is offering an absolutely idealist and non-realist system which

grounds reality in the internal operations of a self-positing consciousness (a reading Kierkegaard seemed to subscribe to), and on the other hand, a reading in which the not-I comes to signify something absolutely external to the operations of consciousness. We can further glean the stakes of the two opposed interpretations of Fichte's project by looking at two different analyses of his project, one by Dieter Henrich and the other by Daniel Braezelle.

In one sense Henrich places emphasis on the practical nature of Fichte's project, stating that "Fichte wants the *Science of Knowledge* to bridge the gap between philosophy and life"⁴⁸ in a way that is akin to Kierkegaard's critique that idealist philosophy fails to provide an adequate account of existential actuality. But while Henrich places emphasis on what could be called the existentialist interpretation of Fichte, he still considers the overall conceptual focus of his work to reside wholly within the structure of immediate human consciousness.⁴⁹ As he states, "opposition is the basic structure of the human mind for Fichte."⁵⁰ Thus for Henrich, it is not the case that the oppositional structure of the human mind is a product of anything external (or material) which affects the seemingly immediate structure of consciousness, rather, any opposition is wholly internal to the structure of the self. According to Henrich's interpretation, the self and the not-self are both opposed and united within consciousness, as there is no external relation that gives birth to any sort of opposition.⁵¹ Henrich then, returning to an existentialist tone, remarks that this constant process of opposition and re-unification within consciousness is what leads to an experience of despair as reflection is longing for a moment of unity.⁵² So while in one sense Henrich places emphasis on the manner in which the immediate unity of self-consciousness still contains a form of opposition and contradiction that leads to an experience of despair as the self desires unity, this entire process is still

⁴⁸ Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel*, p.16.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 223.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.116.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.186.

⁵² Ibid., p.223.

immanently contained within the structure of the self, and thus there is no point of reference to an outside or external world. It seems that according to Henrich's interpretation, there is little room for the movement of faith previously discussed in *The Vocation of Man*, as opposition and its subsequent despair are constituent of the very structure of consciousness.

Another commentator, Daniel Breazeale, offers a reading that follows the oppositional structure emphasized by Henrich, but instead he uses this reading to emphasize the necessity of an external facticity that necessarily affects and disrupts any immanent or wholly internal account of self-consciousness. This argument is outlined in his extremely important essay, 'Check or Checkmate? On the Finitude of the Fichtean Self.'⁵³ As he states early on in this piece, "the true 'Fichtean self', [I will argue], is always involved with finitude."⁵⁴

One of the primary stakes of Breazeale's reading is the externalization of the *Anstoss*, or check. While a commentator such as Henrich places this check inside the structure of self consciousness, Breazeale considers this to be something which does not simply serve as an obstacle, but rather as something which "impels or provokes the 'I' to further actions of self-determination."⁵⁵ Thus for Breazeale the 'I' exists precisely insomuch as it is engaged in a constant contradiction produced by its being both infinite and finite, but this is not a state of opposition that is wholly internal to the structure of consciousness. Outside the 'I', which is this opposition of the finite and the infinite, is the *Anstoss*, which exists externally and adds a higher order level of contradiction to the internal opposition within the 'I'. So, according to Breazeale's interpretation, while the 'I' contains both an infinite and a finite element, there exists a not-I which is wholly external and which haunts any experience of immediacy.

Breazeale goes a step further to discuss the manner in which the existence of the *Anstoss* is a

⁵³ Breazeale, 'Check or Checkmate? On the Finitude of the Fichtean Self', in *The Modern Subject: Conceptions of the Self in Classical German Philosophy* eds. Karl Ameriks and Dieter Sturma (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995)

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.88.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.91.

necessary condition for the activity of the 'I', stating:

[...] the *Anstoss* provides the essential occasion or 'spark', without which neither the theoretical nor the practical activity of the I could be engaged and thus without which there could be no I at all.⁵⁶

Thus the *Anstoss* serves to provide an occasion, or instant, which serves as a pre-condition for both the possibility of the practical activity of the self and of the internal structure which makes the 'I' possible in the first place. Following this interpretation it would be the case that there is something necessarily external that can never be contained by, or produced within, any immediate activity of consciousness.

One of the final, and most crucial, points made in this essay is when Breazeale places emphasizes on the manner by which:

[...] the self that becomes possible in this way is a self that remains radically open to and constrained by a realm beyond its own devising - a realm both of material things and of other rational individuals.⁵⁷

Thus in this reading the Fichtean self is both made possible through the existence of external forces, and is subsequently held open to the possibility contained in the contingent facticity of both material things and the existence of other rational beings. Following this we could say that the Fichtean self is grounded in materiality and held open by the possibility of varying configurations of the material and the social. Following this Breazeale notes "the unavoidable element of contingency

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.99.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 102.

- “facticity” - if you will, at the heart of the Fichtean self.”⁵⁸ And in a manner that problematizes the interpretation that claims that Fichte is primarily concerned with absolute self-positing he goes on to note:

[...] struggle as we may -and must- this original conflict within the self can never be eliminated, for the simple reason that the conflict itself is the condition for the very possibility of the self.”⁵⁹

Following this we see that in opposition to Henrich, Breazeale offers an interpretation of Fichte which not only breaks from the supposedly wholly self-positing and internal ‘I’ previously outlined by Henrich, but one which offers a way of thinking through the material and social aspects of the Fichtean self. According to Breazeale’s reading, the internal conflict within the self (which is driven by its encounter with a not-I) is not something to be overcome, but is rather the very condition for the possibility of the self in the first place.

1.2 F.W.J. Schelling

F.W.J. Schelling is the German idealist who seems to conceptually follow on from Fichte most immediately. While I will once again avoid attempting to provide a summary of his philosophical project as a whole, which is a nearly impossible task in itself,⁶⁰ I aim to present his work in a way that will allow me to set up his importance in our re-consideration of both the

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 98.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 101.

⁶⁰ For the only introduction to Schelling’s work available in English, see Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1994). For a more in depth reading that focuses specifically on Schelling’s nature-philosophy, while at the same time arguing that Schelling’s many stages can be read as part of a larger and consistent project, see Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2008).

philosophy of Kierkegaard and the relevance of idealism for 21st century philosophy. I will begin by outlining Schelling's project as it appears in his *System of Transcendental Idealism*, a text that can be said to continue to work within the framework of Fichtean intellectual intuition as its starting point. From there I will show how Schelling breaks from this Fichtean brand of idealism in the 1809 *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, which would be his last text published during his lifetime. At this juncture I only hope to introduce the basic contours of Schelling's thought, as a more in-depth analysis will occur in chapter two, which will read Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* against Schelling's *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. A discussion of contemporary interpretations of Schelling will be saved until later in this chapter, in which I will compare the stakes of 21st century interpretations of Hegel and Schelling as outlined by Markus Gabriel.

It must be noted that like Fichte, Schelling has often been left out of much of the scholarly debate regarding Kierkegaard's philosophical influences.⁶¹ Unlike Fichte, however, Schelling seems to be left out precisely because Kierkegaard made notable mention of him, particular in the journal entries and lecture notes written by Kierkegaard while in attendance of Schelling's 1841 Berlin lectures. Kierkegaard travelled to Berlin to hear Schelling's inaugural set of lectures shortly after completing his thesis (*The Concept of Irony*) with the hope that his lectures on positive philosophy would help provide an account of actuality that would provide what Kierkegaard felt Hegel's system was lacking. Initially Kierkegaard was extremely enthusiastic about the lectures due to Schelling's mention of actuality, writing in his lecture notes:

⁶¹ Notable exceptions to this trend include Michelle Kosch's *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* and David Kangas' *Kierkegaard's Instant* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007). While Kosch's work is the most comprehensive in contrasting the positions of Schelling and Kierkegaard and noting the former's influence on the later, her reading takes a more pragmatic approach which steers clear of any metaphysical discussion. Kangas, on the other hand, contrasts the theological-ontological projects of both Schelling and Kierkegaard in a manner more in line with the present thesis.

The embryonic child of thought leapt for joy within me, as in Elizabeth, when he mentioned the word "actuality" in connection with the relation of philosophy to actuality. I remember almost every word he said after that. The pure science of reason is, then, only negative, has nothing to do with existence. But existence can also be the object of science. For example, a revelation that always presupposes a God who is, would also belong to this. This science of reason is complete only when it is made to the point of knowing itself as negative, but this is impossible without having the positive outside itself at least as possibility. But if the positive does not come quickly, the negative easily becomes obscured, and the logical is taken away for the actual (*CI* 344).

This excitement was short lived, however, and soon after Kierkegaard wrote this in a letter to his brother about the lectures:

Schelling talks endless nonsense both in an extensive and an intensive sense. I am leaving Berlin and hastening to Copenhagen, but not, you understand, to be bound by a new tie, oh no, for now I feel more strongly than ever that I need my freedom. I do owe Schelling something. For I have learned that I enjoy traveling (*CI* 239).

While the standard maneuver in much Kierkegaard scholarship has been to utilize these examples to argue that Kierkegaard was only influenced by Schelling for a very short period before his pseudonymous authorship even began and that Schelling subsequently played little role, if any, in the formation of Kierkegaard's later thought, I would like to argue that this position fails on at least two levels. First, the Schelling text that Kierkegaard references most frequently in his published work is *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, which was written over 30 years before his

Berlin lectures took place; so whether or not Kierkegaard was left unconvinced by the presentation of positive philosophy, it would be unfair to argue that this would retroactively erase the influence Schelling's earlier work played on Kierkegaard's philosophical formation. Second, it is worth noting that Kierkegaard left Berlin before Schelling gave the lectures that would present his philosophy of mythology and revelation, a form of Christian metaphysics that shares much in common with Kierkegaard's later work. Thus, to hold the position that Kierkegaard rejected wholesale the philosophy of the late Schelling would involve ignoring the fact that Kierkegaard was in attendance for only the first portion of these lectures, and would die before they would have been available to him in published form. It will be my contention that the clearest way in which one can establish the relation between Schelling and Kierkegaard will be through a philosophical evaluation of the similarity between *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* and *The Concept of Anxiety*.⁶²

Having outlined some problematic aspects of the scholarly reception of Kierkegaard's relationship to Schelling, I will now move on to outlining the aspects of Schelling's philosophy that are important for the present thesis. First and foremost, it is crucial to note that the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, published in 1800, can be said to follow the foundational principle of Fichte's *Science of Knowledge*, that principle being the absolute self-positing 'I' (or, intellectual intuition). The key divergence between Schelling's *STI* and Fichte's *SK* is that Schelling wants to move beyond the purely subjective account of idealism provided by Fichte and argue that this foundational principle is present not only in the self, or intelligence, but also in nature, or the objective realm. Or, in other words, Schelling is concerned with the compatibility of subjectivity and objectivity. Schelling's point is that rather than objectivity being something that is simply created by the activity of subjectivity in the Fichtean sense, as something that limits or 'checks' the activity of the self, objectivity *is* the self,

⁶² This will be the topic of chapter two.

and subjective activity is an attempt of the objective (or nature) to come to full consciousness of itself. As Schelling states:

Nature's highest goal, to become wholly an object to herself, is achieved only through the last and highest order of reflection, which is none other than man; or, more generally, it is what we call reason, whereby nature first completely returns into herself, and by which it becomes apparent that nature is identical from the first with what we recognize in ourselves as the intelligent and the conscious.⁶³

In a manner that obviously pre-figures Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Schelling attempts to develop a transcendental system in which the seeming division of intelligence and nature can in fact be accounted for as different aspects of one process of nature, or the absolute, attempting to come to a realized knowledge of itself. In this sense, when the objective aspect of philosophy is primary, it is a nature-philosophy, and when philosophy proceeds from the subjective, it is transcendental philosophy.⁶⁴ So while Schelling remains largely Fichtean in terms of the structure of his primary principle, he uses this principle to develop a theory of the unity of the subjective and objective, or self and nature, something that was of little concern to Fichte's early purely transcendental idealism. Another crucial difference between Schelling and the early Fichte is that rather than placing an absolute unity at the beginning of philosophy, Schelling thinks that the absolute unity of objective and subjective comes at the end of philosophy.

Up until a certain point, Schelling's position still remains largely influenced and critically indebted to the work of Fichte, but this indebtedness ends with the publication of the *Philosophical*

⁶³ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978), p. 6.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom.⁶⁵ While the present discussion of Schelling's *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* may seem brief, this is only because a more detailed discussion of this work and its relation to Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* will occur later in this thesis. In this work Schelling breaks with any sort of identity philosophy (i.e., the identity between the objectivity and subjectivity outlined in the *STI*) and instead considers the groundless ground of all being which is necessary for there to be such thing as genuine human freedom and the accompanying capacity for humans to decide to act in ways both good and evil. When discussing the necessity of this re-investigation into the grounds of freedom Schelling states:

There must be being *before* all ground and before all that exists, thus generally before any duality – how can we call it anything other than the original ground or the non-ground [*ungrund*]? Since it precedes all opposites, these cannot be distinguishable in it nor can they be present in any way. Therefore, it cannot be described as the identity of opposites; it can only be described as the absolute *indifference* of both.⁶⁶

Thus rather than there being any sort of immediate point from which consciousness (and philosophy) can begin, Schelling wants to locate an absolute non-ground of indifference at the bottom of any sort of determinant ground. This position draws a clear break with any sort of Fichtean intellectual intuition, as there is always something 'other' that absolutely precedes the activity of consciousness. This also signifies a break from Schelling's position in the *STI* that reason was that activity by which nature could become an object of itself, as in the *Freedom Essay* Schelling states that:

⁶⁶ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 68.

For, no matter how high we place reason, we do not believe, for example, that anyone may be virtuous or a hero or generally a great human being on the basis of pure reason, indeed, not even, according to the familiar phrase, that the human race can be propagated by it. Only in personality is there life, and all personality rests on a dark ground that indeed must therefore be the ground of cognition as well.⁶⁷

The crucial distinction here is that rather than signifying a progression towards unity, reason is instead the acknowledgement of a primordial separation, or indifference. As Schelling states:

Reason is not activity, like spirit, nor is it the absolute identity of both principles of cognition, but rather indifference; the measure and, so to speak, the general place of truth, the peaceful site in which primordial wisdom is perceived [...]⁶⁸

Thus, rather than developing a typical idealist conception of reason as the process by which spirit, or mind, eliminates a seeming division by coming to an absolute knowledge of itself, Schelling here develops a conception of reason that is precisely the recognition of an absolute indifference at the heart of all being, and an indifference that is absolutely necessary for an adequate theory of human freedom and the capacity for good and evil. This emphasis on indifference also marks a break from the idea that intellectual intuition can serve as an absolute beginning for thought, as that which posits itself and behind or before which there is nothing. Unlike the sort of absolute beginning which can be seen in both Fichte's *SK* and Schelling's *STI*, Schelling is here emphasizing the notion of a non-ground which precedes any sort of unity or supposed absolute beginning. In other words,

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 75.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 76.

while Schelling's *STI* can rightly be considered a philosophy of immediacy, the *Freedom Essay* provides a strong argument for the shortcomings of immediacy for the development of a philosophy of freedom. I will return to this distinction in chapter two.

As I will show in both the later sections of the current chapter as well as subsequent chapters, this aspect of Schelling's thought not only provides the clearest link to considering his influence on the work of Kierkegaard, it is also one of the crucial points at which contemporary interpreters have been able to identify a sort of 'materialist moment' at the heart of Schelling's thought. This non-ground of absolute indifference will thus bear serious resemblance to both the fractured dialectic at play in Kierkegaard's ontology as well as the fundamental 'break' at the heart of a transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity.

1.3 G.W.F Hegel

I will close this chapter with a discussion of Hegel, as his system is one that incorporates many of the insights previously attribute to Fichte and Schelling. As Frederick Beiser has noted, Hegel's philosophical originality has less to do with the development of a completely original system of philosophy than it does with the sophisticated systematization of much of the work that came before him, primarily that of Fichte and Schelling.⁶⁹

While it is beyond the aim of the present chapter to provide any systematic re-construction of Hegel's position, it is worth noting that there is a particular version of Hegel that seems to be consistent throughout a majority of the scholarship considering his relation to the work of Kierkegaard.⁷⁰ In the simplest terms possible, this version is the Hegel of the absolute system, for whom pure speculative thought was able to dialectically climb its way to the perspective of absolute knowledge, and for whom this logic provided a way past religion, ethics, and existence to a unitary

⁶⁹ In Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism*

and consistent structure in which history, religion, and politics were complete. It is Hegel as totalizing philosopher of the system who is often put in opposition to the existential anti-philosophy of Kierkegaard.

One of the primary philosophical stakes of the present thesis will be a re-consideration of the traditional reading of the relationship between Kierkegaard and Hegel. By attempting to bring them closer together, my intention is not to make the gap between their positions easier to cross; on the contrary, by establishing how similar their overall philosophical structures are, I hope to show that the few differences become all the more crucial.⁷¹ Thus, rather than reading Kierkegaard as the absolute anti-Hegelian existential-theologian, I hope to paint a picture in which Kierkegaard can be read as a post-Idealist figure who used his own sort of anti-philosophy to note some of the crucial shortcomings of Hegel's philosophy when applied to the existence of actual individuals.

Hegel's position follows what we have previously seen in Fichte's *Science of Knowledge* and Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* in so much as it is a progression of dialectical oppositions and re-unifications (akin to the structure of Fichte's *SK*) but equally follows Schelling's critical addition of a philosophy of nature to Fichte's purely subjective idealism. One of the crucial distinctions between Hegel's position and that of the Fichte of *SK* and the Schelling of the *STI* is a critique of the self-positing and immediate 'I' which lies at the foundation of each of these systems. For Hegel, pure immediacy is impossible, because any attempt at pure and immediate reflection always presupposes an object of reflection which is external to consciousness, and thus from the beginning reflection is aware of an inconsistency between being and its own reflective activity. As is well known, the majority of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is the story of consciousness (or, spirit) coming of age and reaching a state of absolute knowledge.

⁷¹ On this point I will follow, to an extent, Maria J. Binetti's insistence that the difference between Kierkegaard and Hegel is more to do with their differing perspectives rather than a difference of metaphysical structure.

However, my concern in this section is to merely show Hegel's place in the development of German idealism, and along with that, to briefly introduce an alternative reading of the Hegelian story that has gained particular momentum in the past decade. This reading of Hegel is marked by an insistence on themes such as tragedy, contingency, plasticity, and contradiction, but I will simply refer to this as the *open* reading of Hegel. I choose the term open as what all of these readings hold in common is the idea of the dialectical process as something that is fundamentally open, and without the absolute closure often attributed to it. This interpretation is useful for the aim of this thesis as the previously mentioned anti-Hegelian reading of Kierkegaard is absolutely dependent on a 'totalized' or 'closed' reading of Hegel's dialectic. While this notion of an 'open' Hegel will be built upon gradually throughout the thesis, I will briefly offer some examples of what this reading of Hegel looks like in contemporary interpretations.

An example of this 'open' reading of Hegel, in which the dialectic itself has a dialectical structure (or, in which there is never a consummate moment in which all contradiction is reconciled in a final synthesis) can be seen in Jean-Luc Nancy's short work, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*. In this work Nancy presents a reading of Hegel that focuses on the restlessness of the dialectical movement, and utilizes this emphasis on the internal restlessness of the dialectic to re-think political readings of Hegel which consider him the thinker of the absolute state. As Nancy argues early in this work:

Hegelian thought does not begin with the assurance of a principle. It is simply identical to the restless, preoccupied, and non-presupposed return into itself of philosophy that exposes itself to what it already is: the movement of consciousness of this world that knows itself as

world, and that no representation [...] can saturate or reassure, because, to the contrary, the world bears them all away into its history.⁷²

This notion of beginning, or the precise lack of a proper beginning, is one of the crucial ways in which this open reading of Hegel can bring his thought into much closer philosophical proximity with that of Kierkegaard. As we have already intimated, one of the primary points of distinction between Kierkegaard and the German idealists is the critique of the idealist account of beginnings, which Kierkegaard sees as an untenable reliance on an account of immediacy, or intellectual intuition.⁷³ Keeping Kierkegaard's critique in mind while reading Nancy's account of Hegel helps bring these two thinkers much closer together. As Nancy goes on to argue:

The restlessness of thought first means that everything has already begun: that there will therefore be no foundation, that the course of the world will not be stopped in order to be recommenced. It means that one is no longer in Descartes' element, nor in Kant's, and that, if the thread of history is broken, this happens of itself, because its very continuity is only division and distension.⁷⁴

Nancy goes on:

In these two ways- absence of beginning and absence of end, absence of foundation and absence of completion- Hegel is the opposition of a "totalitarian" thinker.⁷⁵

⁷² Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, p. 8.

⁷³ On this point, see Kangas, *Kierkegaard's Instant*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

If one takes Nancy to be providing a philosophically tenable reading of Hegel, then one is forced to re-think the caricature of Hegel as the thinker of absolute totality and closure, the philosopher unable to account for the inevitability of contingency. If this is the case, then we see that the version of Hegel commonly set in such stark opposition to the work of Kierkegaard may not in fact be Hegel at all.⁷⁶ If, as Nancy argues, the form of ‘circular’ logic favoured by Hegel is in fact a ‘circle of circles’, then one cannot consider Hegel’s dialectic as a forward moving process with a consistent and final teleology.⁷⁷

So, if one at least considers possible a reading of Hegel in which there is no absolute beginning or end, in which the only absolute is restlessness and negativity, and in which the dialectic is itself dialectical,⁷⁸ then one must seriously re-consider the claim that Kierkegaard is a fundamentally anti-Hegelian thinker (and at this point, it may be better to utilize the recent remark by Alain Badiou that Kierkegaard is the ultimate philosopher for/against Hegel.⁷⁹)

Following this, it seems to be the case that there is no such thing as the ‘final moment of the system’ in Hegel, and rather, that any seeming moment of closure is just that, a moment, and one which quickly opens up a new space of movement and contradiction. In this regard Catherine Malabou has argued, “dialectical sublation proceeds through a movement whereby, at one and the same time, it *contracts* and *alienates* the material on which it acts.”⁸⁰ Thus at the moment at which one expects a dialectical sublation, a new dialectical tension emerges which is immanent to the sublation itself. According to this reading of Hegel, negativity is always immanent to the dialectical process itself.

⁷⁶ On this point the work of Jon Stewart is important, as he has argued that in Kierkegaard’s work it is often the case that the signifier ‘Hegel’ or ‘Hegelian’ stand for the work of various Danish Hegelian theologians that Kierkegaard encountered during his studies in Copenhagen. If this is the case, it seems that if anything the Kierkegaard of the pseudonymous authorship had more indifference towards Hegel than he did radical opposition.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

⁷⁸ This is an observation made by Frederic Jameson in his *Valences of the Dialectic*

⁷⁹ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 425.

⁸⁰ Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 146

While there has yet to be a serious overlap between this open reading of Hegel and recent Kierkegaard scholarship, there is one notable exception in the work of Maria J. Binetti. According to Binetti:

During decades, the history of philosophy has kept Kierkegaard and Hegel apart. I believe this has been sadly detrimental to both of them, as their longstanding opposition has swept through the speculative greatness of Kierkegaard's thought and the existential power of Hegel's.⁸¹

She outlines her own reading by focusing on the underlying speculative (and Hegelian) form of logic at play in Kierkegaard's seemingly existential philosophy, and at the same time, explores the manner by which the most conceptual aspects of Hegel's logic are still grounded in the existential and religious uses of love in his early work. She describes this as such: "I have tried to show how the internal logic of Kierkegaard's thought coincides with the fundamental dialectical dynamism of Hegel's philosophy."⁸²

Thus for Binetti we are not faced with an absolute choice between a Hegel wholly concerned with systematic unity in a totalizing system of logic and an irrational Kierkegaard whose insistence on paradox and subjectivity leaves him with no systematic structure. Instead, Binetti argues that it is the case that:

[The] Kierkegaardian repetition is nothing but this powerful idea, mediating the flux of finite

⁸¹ Maria J. Binetti, 'Kierkegaard's Ethical Stage in Hegel's Logical Categories: Actual Possibility, Reality, Necessity', *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* Vol. 3, No. 2-3 (2007), p. 183.

⁸² Ibid.

differences in the eternal journey of subject.⁸³

She puts this in even more systematic terms in another piece in which she argues:

Thus it is not possible to speak either of an insuperable dualism that alienates the spirit, as in Kierkegaard's case, or of an abstract monism that absorbs the singular, as in Hegel. On the contrary, we must speak of an identity that is not pure identity and of a difference that is not pure difference. And this is the crucial point of reconciliation, that its identity only subsists in the other and that the other does not exist but in its identity.⁸⁴

Binetti is here advocating a reading in which we no longer view the Kierkegaardian subject as one absolutely alienated from any structure or grounds, and a reading of Hegel in which the subject is ultimately sublated back into a primary monistic substance. Instead, for both Kierkegaard and Hegel identity *is* identity only in difference, and reconciliation is not the collapse of the two back into the one, but the maintaining of difference of love which serves as a dynamic third. As she goes on to argue:

If identity is possible, it is the work of love [...] Love operates an identity, whose difference subsists, although reconciled; it restores a unity in which everything is made equal, but without mixture or confusion.⁸⁵

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 183-84.

⁸⁴ Binetti, 'Kierkegaard – Hegel: The Religious Stage in Speculative Terms', in *Acta Kierkegaardiana: Volume II, Kierkegaard and the Great Philosophers*, p. 118.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 114, 116.

At this point I hope that it can at least be seen that the traditional reading which has created absolute enemies of Hegel and Kierkegaard may not be the whole story and that through a consideration of this open reading of Hegel we can begin to re-consider the systematic nature of Kierkegaard's existential and religious thought.

1.4 Contemporary Readings of Idealism

This tension between Kierkegaard's relationship to the work of both Schelling and Hegel is one that will appear throughout this thesis, as at various junctures it is easy to read Kierkegaard as either a post-Hegelian or post-Schellingian thinker. This tension is evident in the subtitle to a section on Kierkegaard in Terry Pinkard's *German Philosophy 1760-1860* which is posed as a question; 'Kierkegaard: Post-Schellingian Hegelianism?' For Pinkard, this title alludes to the way in which Kierkegaard can be seen as abandoning any lingering Hegelian tendencies for the hope of the 'positive philosophy' Schelling was meant to lecture on at the Berlin lectures Kierkegaard attended. According to Pinkard's analysis, Schelling's late philosophy was fuelled by the conviction that Hegel had no way of showing that his logical system entailed anything about the actual world, or existence. This could equally be said about Kierkegaard's attitude towards Hegel, or better put, Hegelianism, and thus why Kierkegaard was so disappointed when Schelling did not offer just that, a philosophy of actuality which moved beyond what he saw as the dead-end of Hegelian logic.

Markus Gabriel articulates the difference between Hegel and Schelling in a way that will prove useful in the explication of Kierkegaard to come in subsequent chapters.⁸⁶ Gabriel develops his distinction between the projects of Hegel and Schelling in terms of the relationship each draws between being and reflection. According to this reading, Hegel is not willing to admit the failure of reflection in fully comprehending being, as this would entail a concession to the romantic insistence

⁸⁶ Markus Gabriel, 'The Mythological Being of Reflection- An Essay on Hegel, Schelling, and the Contingency of Necessity', in *Mythology, Madness and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism*

on incompleteness.⁸⁷ For Hegel, being is thus an aspect of reflection, and is completely contained within the movement of reflection as the attempt of reflection to comprehend itself. Schelling, on the other hand, thinks this to be a useless (and impossible) task and instead thinks that the failure of reflection to fully comprehend itself indicates the brute fact of an existence wholly other to reflection, an un-pre-thinkable being, which Schelling refers to in the *Freedom Essay* as the non-ground. This non-ground, or un-pre-thinkable being, will thus forever haunt reflection as the remainder that it can never assimilate. This signifies the brute fact of existence and the absolute inconsistency between subject and object, and this encounter is what leads Schelling to describe the anxiety experienced by consciousness when encountering this fundamental instability as being “seized by dizziness on a high and steep summit.”⁸⁸

As Gabriel goes on to argue for the contemporary relevance of idealism, he notes that:

This is why philosophy deep down in its essence qua groundless creative activity always amounts to an encounter with ourselves, to an existential project. [...] In other words, the *decision* to grasp the constitutive elusiveness of the conditions of possibility of determinacy and to refer to it in terms of the mythology of a domain of all domains is *ethical*.

In short, Gabriel argues that this un-pre-thinkable being which forever haunts reflection is what drives Schelling (and philosophy in general, whether it is aware of this or not) to develop a non-philosophical mythical structure that provides the very grounds by which philosophical speculation is possible at all. Gabriel utilizes a quote from Stanley Cavell that eloquently sums up this need of a non-philosophical foundation for philosophy:

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

⁸⁸ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, p. 47.

We begin to feel, or ought to, terrified that maybe language (and understanding, and knowledge) rests upon very shaky foundations- a thin net over an abyss.⁸⁹

This recognition of the need for a non-philosophical mythological structure is what Gabriel thus sees as putting an irrevocable gap between the idealisms of Hegel and Schelling, and subsequently why he sees Schelling as having more to critically offer 21st century philosophy. While I do not intend to fully endorse Gabriel's critique of Hegelian reflection, I have highlighted his discussion of the relationship between Hegel and Schelling for the sake of alluding to the philosophical importance of considering Kierkegaard as a post-idealist philosopher, or as Pinkard describes him, "a post-Hegelian philosopher in the German tradition."⁹⁰ This is crucial as the critique of the necessary failure of reflection that Gabriel attributes to Schelling is one of the driving forces of Kierkegaard's critique of idealism, and as will later be my contention, Kierkegaard goes further than the later Schelling in his articulation of a genuinely positive philosophy which is concerned with a traumatic encounter with oneself and the subsequent ethical project of existence which comes in the wake of this encounter. Thus it seems like one could rightly read Kierkegaard as pushing a Hegelian inspired model of subjectivity into the actualized and unstable account of reality offered by Schelling. On this point I am thus willing to re-phrase the previously mentioned question-begging title of Pinkard's discussion of Kierkegaard and affirm that Kierkegaard *can* be fundamentally read as a post-Schellingian Hegelian.

⁸⁹ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 178.

⁹⁰ Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 345.

1.5 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to outline some of the general features of the philosophical projects of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel for the purpose of subsequently developing a philosophical reading of the work of Kierkegaard against the background of the major figures and conceptual concerns of German idealism. Particular emphasis has been placed on the manner in which each thinker offers an account, and in some cases a subsequent critique of, immediacy. This critique of immediacy, or of an absolute philosophical beginning, is what then puts reflection in motion for consciousness and opens up the pathway for speculative philosophy. If much of later idealism, and in particular the projects of Schelling and Hegel, can be cast as the critique of Fichtean idealism (which itself is a critique of Kantian idealism), then it will be my contention that we can read Kierkegaard as offering a critique of the philosophies created by this critique, or in more literal terms, Kierkegaard offers a critique *of the critique* (of the critique).

The secondary aim of this chapter has been to outline a method of re-reading the German idealist tradition that will shape the coming interpretation of Kierkegaard. As I have shown, one of the primary stakes of a contemporary re-reading of the idealist tradition is the question of materialism, and the extent to which much of 19th century idealism seems to contain the philosophical kernel of 21st century materialism. Following the interpretation of thinkers ranging from Daniel Breazeale to Slavoj Žižek to Jean-Luc Nancy, I have aimed to show how a reading of the idealists which focuses in particular on a critique of immediacy offers a structure for thinking about the material remainder which signifies that which comes absolutely before the emergence of consciousness, and subsequently provides the drive for the activity of consciousness.

In Fichte we saw how the concept of the *Anstoss*, which can be translated as both ‘check’ and ‘impulse’, complicates any reading which wants to interpret Fichte as the absolute idealist for whom the self-positing I is its own beginning, and subsequently constitutes all objectivity. Following

Breazeale and Žižek, I attempted to show why it is far from paradoxical to speak of the possibility of a Fichtean materialism, in which the *Anstoss* signifies the absolute objectivity which both precedes the positing of the 'I' as well as being that which both drives and 'checks' its subjective activity.

In the discussion of Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* it was shown how this text follows the principles of Fichte's early *Science of Knowledge* but builds on Fichte's early system of idealism by developing an objective nature-philosophy with a parallel structure in which mind emerges from nature. Schelling later backs away from this idealist position in his *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, in which a critique of intellectual intuition leads him to develop a theory of a non-ground, or *urgrund*, which precedes any experience of subjective immediacy, and provides the possibility of freedom in both its good and evil forms. This account of the non-ground been taken up by contemporary thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek and Iain Hamilton Grant⁹¹ to describe the relevance of Schelling to thinking contemporary philosophical issues such as dialectical materialism and the onto-genetic capacity of matter.

Finally, I provided a brief discussion of Hegel, the idealist who is most notable for his systemization of aspects of both Fichte and Schelling. Of primary importance in this discussion of Hegel has been the attempt to argue for the validity of a reading of Hegel as an open thinker, and for the dialectic itself being considered in dialectical terms. In this reading, Hegel's absolute knowledge does not signify the re-unification of spirit with itself in a sort of finalized consistency, but as it has recently been stated by Clayton Crocket and Creston Davis, Hegelian absolute knowledge is instead a subjective position which finally accepts contradiction as an internal condition of every identity.⁹² This idea of 'absolute knowledge' as signifying an internal contradiction may be the biggest stake of the open reading of Hegel for contemporary philosophical thought.

⁹¹ Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*

⁹² Clayton Crocket and Creston Davis, 'Editors Introduction' in *Hegel and the Infinite* ed. Crocket, Davis, and Žižek (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 6.

While this chapter has offered only a brief philosophical outline of the major figures of German Idealism, the following chapters of the thesis will continue to build on this foundation as I consider particular instances of Kierkegaard's engagement with German idealism, and use these instances to develop a reading of Kierkegaard's post-idealist philosophy and the manner in which Kierkegaard's socio-political thought emerges through this response to idealism.

2: Anxiety and Ontology

2.0 Introduction

In the previous chapter I provided a brief outline of the major currents and theoretical themes of the key figures of German idealist philosophy. The pinnacle of the development of idealism is often referred to as absolute idealism, which is an attempt to give a complete metaphysical account of the relation between subject and object that reconciles the gap left in the wake of Kantian idealism. In particular, Hegel and Schelling each offer a systematic philosophy that explains the dynamic relation of the subjective and objective aspects of existence. Hegel outlines his absolute idealism through the idea of concept, or notion, which accounts for the dynamic unfolding of spirit in its process of constantly overcoming the contradictions of objectivity. With Schelling, the place of the idea (or ideal structure) shifts from the subjective to the objective, and nature provides the structural account which shows how mind emerges from matter. It is crucial to note that when we speak of idealism in a properly ontological fashion that any reading that attempts to posit idealism as the absolute antithesis of either realism or materialism risks missing the point. None of the German idealists (Fichte-Schelling-Hegel) were anti-realist in the crass sense, and in different ways each of their mature philosophies offered an account of the facticity of the objective world and the manner in which this facticity crucially shapes the development of subjectivity, or spirit. The point of idealism is not that the world only exists insofar as it is experientially created through the activity of the thinking subject, but rather that there exists an ideal structure contained within both subject and object. Rather than an epistemology which is concerned only with the manner in which human consciousness is able to construct a coherent world out of its perceptions, absolute idealism aims at a properly metaphysically understanding of the very structure underlying both consciousness and reality.

Along with this it is equally crucial to note that this brand of absolute idealism can be referred to as a dynamic monism, inasmuch as this metaphysics does not posit two different worlds or substances which are in a process of relation, but rather a process of dynamic self-relation in which substance develops a knowledge of itself through its own process of becoming subject.⁹³ This is why idealism represents one of the boldest attempts to articulate a philosophy of freedom that is also metaphysically rigorous, as this dynamic process of subject overcoming object in a process of repetition outlines a metaphysical freedom. This structure, of freedom's becoming, is thus the very structure of the absolute idea, which serves as the point of relation between the two previous terms, subject and object or self and world. Thus when we say that idealism is not in opposition to realism or materialism, we mean that idealism is not the negation of the reality of self and world, but rather an attempt to provide a systematic account of the underlying, or ideal, structure that accounts for the relation and development of both subject and object as they attempt to overcome their fractured relationship.

This understanding of absolute idealism is necessary as it helps make sense of why I can claim to offer a reading of Kierkegaard which considers his philosophical and religious project in such a way as to develop an ontological account of his project which is largely idealist in its orientation. While it has been said that “however else Kierkegaard may be classified in the history of thought, he stands in direct opposition to the philosophical idealism of his day,”⁹⁴ this traditional reading of Kierkegaard only holds weight when the term idealism simply means a philosophical system in which the human mind projects an ideal structure onto the whole of reality. As we have seen, this is not what idealism meant for the German idealist, and thus would seem a basic mistake of understanding to read Kierkegaard's intellectual project as absolutely contra the project of

⁹³ This point has recently been made by Maria J. Binetti in regards to Kierkegaard's relationship to the philosophy of German idealism.

⁹⁴ Reidar Thomte, editors introduction to *Concept of Anxiety*, p. xi.

philosophical idealism. This present work is an attempt to show that Kierkegaard's authorship offers us an ontological structure that accomplishes much of that which Idealism aimed at, namely, an absolute structure which accounts for the relation between subjective and objective aspects of reality. The key difference will be that while much of German idealism functions from the perspective of the absolute, or universal, Kierkegaard begins from the particularity of existential actuality and the experience of the individual subject.

In order to properly situate Kierkegaard's relationship to idealism before I move onto the *The Concept of Anxiety* I will briefly consider one of his most explicit critiques of idealist philosophy, his critique of Fichte in *The Concept of Irony*.

2.1 The Concept of Irony

While there are few direct references to the work of Johann Fichte in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship, the penultimate chapter of his thesis *The Concept of Irony* is entitled 'Irony After Fichte' and serves as a useful tool in establishing Kierkegaard's relation to the work of Fichte as well as to a certain brand of subjective idealism as a whole. While much of the work is concerned with Hegel's reading of Socrates and its implications for the place of irony in modern philosophy, it becomes obvious in the aforementioned chapter that Kierkegaard's discussion throughout the work considers Fichte as providing the theoretical underpinnings for the philosophical version of irony during the first half of the 19th century.

Kierkegaard begins this chapter by contextualizing Fichte's theory of consciousness (and his account of subjectivity) in terms of Kant's critical project. Describing the fate of the 'I' in post-Kantian philosophy, Kierkegaard states:

The more the I in criticism became absorbed in contemplation of the I, the leaner and leaner the I became, until it ended up becoming a ghost [...] (*CI* 272).

He goes on a few lines later:

Because reflection was continually reflecting about reflection, thinking went astray, and every step it advanced led further and further, of course, from any content (*CI* 272).

Kierkegaard here points out that the primary question of post-Kantian philosophy, and in particular subjective idealism, pertained to the status of the thing-in-itself, and to whether the “I itself is not a Ding-an-Sich” (*CI* 273), a question he says was ‘raised and answered’ by Fichte. Kierkegaard goes on to note that Fichte, “Removed the difficulty with this an-sich [in-itself] by placing it within thought”, and that for Fichte, “The producing I is the same as the produced I” (*CI* 273).

Quite un-controversial in his assessment at this point, Kierkegaard is simply pointing out the way in which Fichte’s basic position entails a re-positioning of the thing-in-itself from the noumenal realm to the center of the ‘I’ itself. It is important to now point out the grounds for Kierkegaard’s criticism of Fichte, and why he would associate this position with the ironic.

While Kierkegaard notes that Fichte’s account of the I=I ‘infinitely liberated thought’ (*CI* 273), he goes on to argue that Fichte’s infinite I is always an absolute negative infinity, which is lacking both finitude and content. This negative infinity is worthy of criticism for Kierkegaard as it is an infinity that is for nothing, an infinite striving for the sake of striving itself, completely internal to itself, devoid of an external content which would give purpose or bring it into touch with the finitude of lived actuality. According to Kierkegaard, Fichte:

[...] advanced an idealism beside which any actuality turned pale, an acosmism in which his idealism became actuality even though it was Docetism. In Fichte, thought was infinitized, subjectivity became the infinite, absolute negativity, the infinite tension and urge (*CI* 273).

Because Kierkegaard's concern, as we have already seen, was that (philosophical) thought begin with the particularity of existential actuality and subsequently move to a consideration of the ideal only as secondary to the experience of actuality, he saw Fichte's negative infinity prioritizing the ideal at the cost of the actual, even though Fichte himself was unaware of this loss. As Kierkegaard notes, Fichte 'achieved the absolute beginning' in which 'the I became the constituting entity' in the creation of the world. This position falls into the 'bad' brand of idealism that Kierkegaard is against, because it is a completely subjective idealism in which the subjective is the constituting entity of reality, whereas for Kierkegaard the subject always remains constituted by something absolute prior to its own logical reflection. The difference between subjective and absolute idealism has much to do with the notion of grounds, as for (the early) Fichte the subject constitutes its own grounds, while for Kierkegaard (and absolute idealism) the subject is grounded in something which precedes it, the ideal structure of being.

What Kierkegaard's critique of Fichte in *The Concept of Anxiety* shows us is precisely that his problem with idealist philosophy is only a critique of subjective idealism and not absolute idealism as such. Subjective idealism, which is a position that neither Fichte, Schelling or Hegel held by the time each reached their mature philosophical system, is a position wherein the subject constructs reality through their own activity of perception, and thus the subject (or I) serves as the grounds of its own activity. Put differently, in this view the subject, or I, always serves as its own grounds. Kierkegaard finds this position problematic precisely because it fails to account for anything outside of the activity of the subject, and thus subjective consciousness seems to have given birth to its own

activity. As should be clear by now, this brand of idealism was not advocated by the mature philosophies of any of the German idealist. It is worth noting, however, that when read only in the context of Fichte's early philosophy (mainly the 1794 *Science of Knowledge*) Kierkegaard's critique holds fairly accurate. That said, we cannot extrapolate Kierkegaard's critical analysis to the whole of Fichte's project as soon after this (beginning with the 1804 *Science of Knowing*) Fichte realized the limits of subjective idealism and gave a whole new level of ontological importance to the not-I as representing not just the objective aspect of the I, but rather as representing the facticity of that which exists wholly prior to and external to the I. While Kierkegaard never had the chance to respond to Fichte's later position⁹⁵, I think it is clear that he would have had much less to critique in Fichte's shift away from subjective idealism.

Now that we have seen why the assertion that Kierkegaard is absolutely opposed to idealist philosophy holds only if one takes early subjective idealism to be representative of the development of idealism as a whole, I find it completely reasonable to affirm the recent assertion that Kierkegaard "whether consciously or unconsciously" follows the metaphysical structure of absolute idealism.⁹⁶ While Kierkegaard's ethical and religious authorship often operates in literary tropes and pseudonymous voices which can discourage any attempt at a systematic reading, at its core, this authorship follows the same conceptual path as absolute idealism. Thus, as one commentator has noted, "the irony is that Kierkegaard is unable to avoid those very systematic structures that he so constantly disparages in Hegel's writings."⁹⁷ Kierkegaard's philosophical project, which I am arguing is most clearly developed over three of his works,⁹⁸ provides an account of spirit's break with immediacy, its development into reflection and its return to a higher form of immediacy. In other

⁹⁵ Fichte's Berlin lectures were un-published during Kierkegaard's lifetime.

⁹⁶ This claim was made by Maria J. Binnetti during a seminar at the Søren Kierkegaard research center in Copenhagen in September, 2011. Thank you to Dr. Binetti for providing notes from her presentation.

⁹⁷ Stephen N. Dunning, 'Kierkegaard's Systematic Analysis of Anxiety', in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Anxiety* ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985), p. 9.

⁹⁸ These works are: *The Concept of Anxiety*, *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Works of Love*.

words, Kierkegaard provides an account of freedom as the process by which spirit negates the necessary facticity of the actual. Immediacy is negated through the activity of reflection, and reflection is negated in the moment of decision that leads to resolution and action.

It is also worth noting that while I am arguing that Kierkegaard's authorship contains a philosophical core which basically follows the structure of absolute idealism, I am not simply arguing that Kierkegaard's unique place as a thinker can be reduced to little more than a 'religious reading of Idealism by a quirky Dane'. On the contrary, while I will argue that the core ontological structure of his project follows idealism, Kierkegaard pushes his thought a step further than the idealist were willing to go by emphasizing that if reflection is not negated by decision and action, philosophy remains little more than an intellectual exercise that is incapable of changing the world, or the self, in any useful way.⁹⁹ This is why the present work is considering the ontological and political as inextricably linked in the work of Kierkegaard, as his slight modification of idealist metaphysics opens up a set of political possibilities which pre-figure much of what has emerged in 20th century post-idealist philosophy.

2.2 Actuality

One of the crucial ways in which we can begin to draw this slight but meaningful distinction between Kierkegaard's project and that of the German idealist is through considering the differences in their respective understanding and use of key philosophical terms. In particular, the most obvious way that we can distinguish Kierkegaard's position from that of the idealist is through considering the different use of the concept of *actuality* put to use by both Kierkegaard and the idealist. This difference is so crucial as Kierkegaard begins *The Concept of Anxiety* with an analysis of how

⁹⁹ In this sense I find it rather uncontroversial to state that Kierkegaard's attitude towards the practice of philosophy can be considered pretty similar to Marx and the left Hegelians. If we were to imagine Kierkegaard's response to Marx's 11th thesis on Feuerbach, he would likely re-phrase it to add that philosophy should aim to provide the conditions for you to "first change yourself, and then change the world."

contemporary philosophy makes a crucial error when actuality is considered as a part of logic, because for Kierkegaard contingency, which has no place in logic, is an essential part of actuality.¹⁰⁰ As Jon Stewart has shown in his work *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, Kierkegaard's critique of the conflation of actuality and logic in this text has little to do with the work of Hegel and more to do with the Hegelian system of logic offered by Danish philosopher and theologian Adolph Peter Adler, who ends his work on logic with a section entitled 'Actuality.'¹⁰¹ Kierkegaard's issue is that thinkers like Adler believe that the categories of logic are capable of accurately describing existential reality, or in other words, that logic can give us an account of the actuality of human existence. As Stewart shows, however, the problem is not that Adler and others misuse the concept of actuality in the way outlined by Kierkegaard, but instead, Kierkegaard and Adler mean completely different things when they use the term actuality.

For Kierkegaard, the term actuality signifies *existential actuality*, meaning the world of human experience and existence. So for Kierkegaard the world of actuality would be the world of human relations, weather patterns, geological formations, political institutions and artistic creation. His use of this term is thus much more 'everyday' than it is philosophical or metaphysical. Following this, Kierkegaard's critique is that Adler's work attempts to account for actuality (which is always dynamically developing) in the language of logic (which is objective and stable). This also relates to Kierkegaard's usage of the terms immanence and transcendence in relation to this critique of the conflation of logic and actuality. It is reasonable to interpret these terms in the light of their contemporary ontological usage, but for Kierkegaard they do not bear the same ontological consequences. Put simply, immanence for Kierkegaard signifies a closed and stable concept, akin to the sort of logic he is speaking of in *The Concept of Anxiety*. Transcendence, on the other hand, is a dynamic and developing concept that is related to the freedom and possibility of developing reality.

¹⁰⁰ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, p. 9-10.

¹⁰¹ Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, pp. 378-380.

While actuality is an *existential* category for Kierkegaard, for Adler (and the German idealists) it is a purely *conceptual* category. Following Hegel, Adler associates the actual with the rational, meaning that the actual is that which corresponds to rational concepts. In this sense, actuality is not concerned with the dynamic freedom of the becoming of existential actuality, but is rather only concerned with the rationality of concepts. This is why Adler can conclude his *Logic* with a section entitled ‘Actuality’, as he is merely pointing out that when a concept is fully rational, it can then be considered actual. Following this it is clear that Kierkegaard’s critique is merely the product of a misunderstanding, as a truly Hegelian logician would likely agree with Kierkegaard in affirming that logic as a mode of conceptual understanding has little to offer our understanding of existential reality, as for them it is only a means of establishing the rationality of concepts.

While Stewart’s analysis is crucial in allowing us to disassociate Kierkegaard’s critique of the conflation of actuality and logic in *The Concept of Anxiety* from a substantial critique of idealist philosophy, it also runs the risk of allowing a reading in which this misunderstanding removes any philosophical significance from Kierkegaard’s emphasis on actuality as an existential category. While Kierkegaard does critique Adler over a misunderstanding, his emphasis on philosophical thought beginning from existential actuality helps us to understand the unique position developed through his critique of idealism. Kierkegaard believes that thought should not attempt to begin from any position of stability existing outside of the dynamic nature of actuality, but rather that the philosopher’s thought is always already fully immersed in this process of becoming. This is crucial as Kierkegaard believes that those who begin thinking *within* thought will only ever remain in an infinite circle of logical reflection; on the other hand, by beginning with the acknowledgement that there is always something forever outside the circle of logical reflection, the culmination of thought necessarily leads out of reflection and back into actuality.

The biggest risk of Stewart's historical account of Kierkegaard's misunderstanding of the idealist conception of actuality is that this misunderstanding renders moot the uniqueness of Kierkegaard's critique of a logical notion of actuality. Even if, as is the case, Kierkegaard was operating with a misunderstanding as to the nature of actuality in idealist thought, his emphasis on the contingency of lived (existential) actuality offers a modification of the idealist position that pre-figures much post-Hegelian and contemporary continental thought. As I will outline later in the current chapter, this critique is what subsequently enables Kierkegaard to be read as inaugurating his own form of post-Hegelian ontology.

This discussion of the meaning of the term actuality in Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* opens the path to discuss another concept that plays a crucial role in this text and the first moments of Kierkegaard's philosophical project, the notion of *grounds*. One of the primary philosophical motives behind *The Concept of Anxiety* is a critique of the grounds of philosophical speculation, and in particular, any sort of speculation which believes itself capable of beginning immediately, without presupposition or reference to anything outside itself. As I outlined in the previous chapter, the successive attempts to develop a complete system of absolute idealism entailed a series of re-beginnings. Fichte began with a subjective idealism in which the being of the subject was dependent on its own activity, Schelling moved past this brand of Fichtean idealism to develop a theory in which mind and nature were related in a process of becoming and Hegel offered an absolute idealism in which the development of thought and being could be accounted for by the process of spirit overcoming its negative relations to substance. Kierkegaard's critique of immediacy entails a critique of many of these idealist attempts to ground the activity of philosophical speculation, in particular as he sees many of these attempts failing to account for the facticity of the existing individual who is carrying out the activity of philosophical reflection.

Terry Pinkard has noted that according to Kierkegaard, Hegel could not show how his logical system had anything to say about the actual world as his presupposition-less beginning allows him to avoid considering the place of the particular thinker in the world.¹⁰² In this sense, Kierkegaard sees the Hegelian position as positing that thought serves as the grounds for its own process of reflection. As I outlined in the previous chapter, Schelling's position is able to respond to Hegel's presupposition-less thought through positing that there is an aspect of un-pre-thinkable being, or an *urgrund*, which forever precedes the activity of the thinking subject and creates the conditions for both subjective and ontological freedom.

The distinction between the positions of Hegel and Schelling, and the consequences of this distinction, have been clearly outlined in the previously mentioned recent work of Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek in which they argue that for Hegel, being is always an aspect of the activity of reflection, but for Schelling reflection always depends on un-pre-thinkable being.¹⁰³ This means that for Schelling reflection indicates the brute facticity of existence that always bears a mythological remainder of being that the activity of reflection can never fully account for. Following Schelling, Gabriel and Žižek argue that reflection is always based on an experience of the 'trauma of God', or put differently, that reflection is the product of the fact that something absolute exists forever outside of the recuperative activity of reflection. In this sense, reflection is never able to properly account for, or presuppose, its own existence, and this leaves its existence as whyless and grounded in contingency. We can here see how Kierkegaard would seem to be on the side of Schelling regarding the question of the grounds of reflection; as I have previously noted, in the early pages of *The Concept of Anxiety* Kierkegaard critiques philosophies attempting to ground their understanding of actuality in logic for the fact that logic has no place for contingency, which is an essential part of the actual. Kierkegaard, like Schelling, believes that this 'trauma of God' (which we will later see is

¹⁰² Pinkard, *German Philosophy*, p. 327.

¹⁰³ Gabriel and Žižek, *Mythology, Madness and Laughter*, p. 20.

called anxiety) leaves us without immediate grounds, and as such un-grounded in the facticity of contingency.¹⁰⁴ It makes sense then that Pinkard refers to Kierkegaard as a ‘Post-Schellingian Hegelian,’¹⁰⁵ as Kierkegaard takes Schelling’s critique of any immediate grounds of reflection to bear on the absolute idealism of Hegel. That is to say, in many senses Kierkegaard replaces Hegel’s ‘presupposition-less beginning’ with a Schellingian *urgrund* and then continues from there in a largely Hegelian fashion. The legitimacy of Pinkard’s evaluation will be implicitly considered throughout this thesis.

2.3 An Introduction to Anxiety

Now that the stakes of the present discussion have been adequately outlined, this chapter will proceed as follows. I will begin by offering my own systematic reading of *The Concept of Anxiety*. I am explicitly using the term systematic to describe this reading, as my aim is to draw out an account of ontological structure in this work that will set the stage to further extend my interpretation to the realms of the anthropological and the socio-political. Thus my focus will primarily reside on a systematic interpretation of anxiety and the ontological conditions that lead to anxiety as conceived by Kierkegaard. After this I will move on to a specifically ontological account of the stakes of this text, in which I will use the term *fractured dialectic* to characterize the systematic core of Kierkegaard’s philosophical and religious project. I will conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of the social and political implications of this ontological structure. While a more substantial account of the political implications of Kierkegaard’s project will be saved for chapters three and four, at this point it is simply necessary to point out how this fractured dialectic opens up the space for a critique of any political project claiming to hold any necessary ontological grounds. Through this analysis of

¹⁰⁴ While Schelling uses the term ‘*urgrund*’ to describe this groundless ground of reflection, Kierkegaard uses the equivalent Danish term, ‘*Afgrund*’, which translates to abyss in English.

¹⁰⁵ Pinkard, *German Philosophy*, p. 345.

anxiety I will show why freedom is at the heart of Kierkegaard's project, and why this freedom is ontologically grounded and not just an illusion of subjective experience.

Now that the philosophical stakes of my argument are clear, it is worth briefly introducing the text, *The Concept of Anxiety*, and its place in Kierkegaard's authorship as a whole, and in particular its place in my ontological reading of Kierkegaard's project. The subtitle to this work is 'A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin', which is a misleading description on a variety of levels. Anyone familiar with the text will immediately note the irony contained in considering this work to be in anyway simple, as this work could easily be regarded as one of Kierkegaard's most conceptually difficult. Along with this, the remainder of the title gives the impression that the book is concerned with considering the psychological effects of the theological concept of hereditary sin. It is worth immediately noting that Kierkegaard does not mean psychological in the contemporary sense, but rather this term signifies the doctrine of both absolute and subjective spirit in a properly Hegelian sense. As we will see more clearly, spirit is the name given to the development of freedom, so the psychological is concerned with providing a systematic account of the dynamic development of spirit (CA 23-24).

Along with this proper understanding of the meaning of the psychological in the context of this text it is worth considering what Kierkegaard means by 'Hereditary Sin', and in particular, the place of the theological concept of sin in this investigation. While it is easy for one reading with a purely philosophical intention to 'tune out' when Kierkegaard begins a discussion of hereditary sin, which seems to imply little more than the guilty feeling experienced by the Christian believer when transgressing against God's law, on further analysis it becomes clear that Kierkegaard's usage of the concept of sin is just as much ontological as it is theological, as it remains outside the realm of any particular theological dogma. In this text, and in Kierkegaard's systematic project as a whole, we can consider sin as the negation of the absolute, or put differently, sin *is* absolute negation. As John

Elrod has phrased it, for Kierkegaard, “sin is the abandonment of immanent self-reflection in the consciousness of one’s self as an impossibility.”¹⁰⁶ This negation is the individual subject absolutely negating its own grounds in an attempt to assert its autonomy in the face of an absolute that exists absolutely independently of it. This space opened up by absolute negation is thus the space of freedom. This absolute negation is the creation of the gap between subject and object in which spirit is able to operate freely, and in more ontological terms, spirit emerges through the cracks in being in which subject and object (or thought and being) are severed. It is worth noting that it is not the operation of the subject that creates this gap, but rather absolute negation is the act by which the subject is trying to distance themselves from this gap, and from any sorts of dependency on objectivity. This negation is the bitter recognition by the subject that it is not the absolute, and is not completely responsible for the conditions of its own existence. We will later see how the absolute negation of sin opens up the space for the eventual non-dialectical reconciliation of subject and object through the activity of love.

The clearest way to consider this text is to begin at the beginning, which is itself a reflection on the problems of beginnings in speculative philosophy. In this reading, I will argue that rather than holding any serious structural (or, systematic) disagreement with the absolute idealists, Kierkegaard’s constructive critique is largely to do with systems of idealism that attempt to begin from thought alone in a presupposition-less manner. Particularly as it pertains to *CA*, Kierkegaard is concerned with drawing a distinction between the realms of *logic* and *actuality* (or *thought* and *being*); arguing that subjective idealism fails inasmuch as it conflates the two and posits that the structure of logic is adequate to describe the lived experience of actuality. In particular, Kierkegaard is here concerned with problematizing any notion that actuality can have an immediate beginning in a manner akin to the operations of logic, and equally that logic provides the conceptual tools

¹⁰⁶ John W. Elrod, *Being and Existence in Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 217.

necessary to adequately theorize freedom and contingency. For Kierkegaard, any absolute beginning absolutely precedes our reflective activity and any claim that reflection can grasp this beginning is necessarily misguided.

Through this critique Kierkegaard develops a theory of the self which is properly ‘grounded’ only inasmuch as it is un-grounded in a manner akin to the *urgrund* posited as the un-pre-thinkable grounds of being by Schelling in his *Freedom Essay*, as outlined in the previous chapter. Thus through his deliberations on the nature of sin, Kierkegaard develops a critique of the tendency to make an absolutely immediate beginning the ground of the self and the act of philosophy as such, and instead develops a theory of un-grounded subjectivity which splits off from any form of immediacy through a radical encounter with the instant of its own abyssal freedom.

This encounter with the radical freedom signified by the gap separating the subject from immediate access to its own grounds produces the experience of anxiety by the subject. This anxiety is not an anxiety about a set of possible outcomes, or a determinate content, but is rather an anxiety about the absolute nothingness which interrupts any claim of the subject to autonomy. It is an anxiety that is precisely *about* nothing. In this sense we could say that the ontological content of the experience of anxiety is similar to the thematic content of the sitcom *Seinfeld*; it is literally about *nothing*. It is not a matter of being without epistemological access to some underlying structure or reason, but rather the experience of realizing that there is no underlying structure or meaning that we could ever access, thus there simply *is* only nothing. In other terms, we could say that anxiety is the experience of realizing that there is no higher order necessity existing outside of, or before, our experience of actuality.

Kierkegaard begins the introduction to *CA* with an explanation of the place of (philosophical) science in modern thought as that which commits the ‘man of science’ to ‘the service of totality.’ Here, parodying a certain brand of Hegelian thought (in particular the work of Adler),

Kierkegaard aims to problematize speculative science, or philosophy, not because of a bad employment of logic, but rather for what he sees as the problematic conflation of logic with actuality in this sort of thought. Kierkegaard explains this:

Thus when an author entitles the last section of the logic 'Actuality', he thereby gains the advantage of making it appear that in logic the highest has already been achieved, or if one prefers, the lowest, for neither logic nor actuality is served by placing actuality in the Logic (CA 4).

Kierkegaard is here beginning to point out the irony inherent in the notion that logic, a completely ideal mode of speculative thought, could adequately grasp the lived particularity of actuality. He goes on:

Actuality is not served thereby, for contingency, which is an essential part of the actual, cannot be admitted within the realm of logic (CA 10).

And:

Logic is not served thereby, for if logic has thought actuality, it has included something that it cannot assimilate, it has appropriated at the beginning what it should only [presuppose] (CA 10).

The crucial aspect of this passage for my reading is Kierkegaard's claim that logic oversteps its bounds precisely at the moment at which it includes that which it cannot assimilate, or in other

words, takes as its starting point that which it cannot adequately account for in its own terms. This is why he says that it has appropriated that which it should only presuppose. This point is as logical as it is ontological for Kierkegaard as he is accusing (speculative) logic of claiming to be in possession of its own foundational moment (or grounds) rather than acknowledging the necessity of pre-supposing a primary ontological event that remains forever beyond the recuperative activity of logical reflection.

At this point it is crucial to note that the critique of actuality Kierkegaard offers here falls short in the manner explained earlier in this chapter, namely, he is confusing the idealist notion of actuality as a logical (or, rational) category with his own notion of actuality as an existential category concerned with the particularity of lived experience. So while the idealists are merely attempting to use logic as a science to provide a grounds for actuality in which something being actual merely equates to its also being rational, Kierkegaard accuses these speculative thinkers of attempting to use logic to provide an account of the pre-rational grounds of existential actuality. This conceptual misunderstanding does not render Kierkegaard's critique without merit, however, as he still makes two strong criticisms against various forms of idealism. The first is to do with subjective idealism, which attempts to posit any absolute beginning from within the activity of reflection itself.

Kierkegaard's critique would hold here as subjective idealism attempts to ground philosophical speculation in the logical activity of reflection, rather than recognizing that the activity of actuality operates independently of this reflection. The second manner in which this somewhat misguided critique helps us understand Kierkegaard's position is through his argument that logic fails inasmuch as it cannot include an account of contingency, which is an essential part of the actual. This critique helps give us a clue as to what form of logic Kierkegaard is against. It seems here that Kierkegaard is

opposed to any form of logic that considers itself to be capable of both totality and consistency.¹⁰⁷

Kierkegaard's problem with a system of logic claiming to be capable of describing reality as a totalized structure is that it would provide nothing more than the sort of logical immanence discussed earlier. Thus, this form of logic attempts to provide a detailed account of not only what currently *is*, but also of what could ever possibly *be*. This form of logic would thus rule out any ability to include contingency, as the possibility of contingency signifies the potential existence of possibilities that are not currently accounted for by the operation of a system of logic. This brings us back to the distinction Kierkegaard wants to draw between immanence and transcendence. Because reality is itself engaged in a process of becoming, Kierkegaard is critical of any conceptual framework that attempts to explain reality in a consistent and totalizing framework as reality as a dynamic process is always capable of transcending our own conceptual frameworks. We will soon see how this critique is necessary to the ontological picture Kierkegaard presents in this text.

As with many of Kierkegaard's philosophical discussions, however, his critique is not leveled primarily at the level of the purely ontological, but rather with the properly lived ethico-religious *experience* of the ontological, or as it is referred to in this text, 'dogmatics'. This concern with dogmatics leads Kierkegaard to explore the ethical implications of the logical conception of immediacy, or 'the immediate'. This misplaced notion of beginning seeps into dogmatics by affecting its understanding of faith. According to Kierkegaard:

Faith loses by being regarded as the immediate, since it has been deprived of what lawfully belongs to it, namely, its historical presupposition. Dogmatics loses thereby, because it does

¹⁰⁷ By totality I am here referring to a system that thinks itself capable of theorizing the whole, without remainder and by consistency, I mean a form of logic that is wholly consistent with itself and leaves no room for chance, contingency or becoming. Put otherwise, this consistency would be a consistency between thought and being, or logic and actuality.

not begin where it properly should begin, namely, within the scope of an earlier beginning (*CA* 10).

Whereas Kierkegaard previously critiqued speculative logic for assuming itself capable of accounting for its own beginning within its own circle of logical reflection, he now exemplifies what this looks like in the context of ethico-religious existence. In regards to faith, this conception of immediacy leads to the assumption that faith can adequately account for its own starting point, or in other words, that the starting point of faith is immanent to the activity of faith itself. In opposition to this, Kierkegaard wants to argue that dogmatics and faith can be grounded within the scope of an earlier beginning that lies outside the bounds of reflection. This means that faith when properly considered should reflect the sort of un-grounded ontological starting point previously discussed, as rather than being capable of accounting for its own beginning, faith is the acknowledgement of being grounded in something that is infinitely prior to its own beginning, and forever outside of faith's own circle of understanding.

My discussion of the introduction to *CA* is important because without it, this text could be read as simply being concerned with the psychological and theological aspects of the self and her experience of anxiety. In this sense it is telling that Kierkegaard begins the text with this introduction, as it is almost explicitly philosophical in its critical considerations of idealist conceptions of logic and immediacy. This is crucial because the five main sections of the work switch to a predominately mythological tone and structure.¹⁰⁸ My contention will remain, however, that when reading this work in the context of the critique of idealism outlined in the introduction, the mythological examples and discussions can be seen as exemplifications of the problems that emerge when the logical claims of

¹⁰⁸ By *mythical* I am thinking in particular of Schelling's lectures on philosophy and mythology, in which he makes the argument that because we do not have logical access to ontological grounds, mythology is our manner of attempting to explain the ontological without a recourse to logic.

idealism are placed in the service of actuality, or, ethico-religious existence. Along with this, I aim to flesh out my claim that the critique leveled in the introduction has just as much to do with the ontological as it does the logical, and that one of the primary stakes of this work is whether or not philosophy can claim to ever grasp any immediate notion of beginning at the heart of its ontological claims. I will contend throughout this chapter that this ontological critique places Kierkegaard clearly in line with the notions of *urgrund* and un-pre-thinkable being as they are developed in the middle and late works of Schelling. While at the level of ontology this work corresponds most obviously to the work of Schelling, at the level of the development of a theory of subjectivity, or consciousness, the problematic Kierkegaard seems to be responded to in this work are more closely related to the opposing theory of subjectivity as developed by Fichte.

2.4 The Instant

As I have just argued, one of the key philosophical questions reckoned with by Kierkegaard in *CA* is the question of the logical beginnings of philosophical reflection, and in particular, the lack of an adequate account of beginning in the thought of many of the subjective idealists. In his recent study *Kierkegaard's Instant*, David Kangas frames the project of *CA* in relation to Kant and Fichte, for whom “the originary conditions of knowledge [...] lie in an irreducible unity of self-consciousness, its presence to itself.”¹⁰⁹ In light of this, Kangas sees Kierkegaard as taking a step further backwards than either Kant or Fichte willed to venture by asking how self-consciousness comes to posit itself in the first place. When Kierkegaard takes this step beneath any principle of subjective self-positing, which we can consider a subjective form of idealism, he discovers anxiety, which is the non-dialectical relation of the self to nothing, or non-being, which opens up the very possibility for the self to attempt to serve as its own grounds. The primary critique here is that any theory which begins

¹⁰⁹ Kangas, *Kierkegaard's Instant*, p. 163.

from the assumption of the original unity of self-consciousness as a consistent substance leaves out any sort of un-pre-thinkable being which resides outside the bounds of the reflective activity of consciousness. This lack of anything outside the unity of self-consciousness leaves little room for the freedom and pure possibility-of-possibility which are so important to Kierkegaard's ontological and existential project.

In response to this consistent model of self-consciousness (in which there is no gap between the objective and subjective aspects of the self), Kierkegaard outlines his own ontology of the self in response to the Fichtean account of the self in which the 'I=I'. Kierkegaard's account of the self is one that is made possible by the non-ground of anxiety which allows for the original act of self-positing, or negation, which he refers to as sin, and the subsequent freedom which comes through the self's awareness that it has no corresponding object, or more precisely, the self experiences this anxiety in the awareness that the something it corresponds to is precisely nothing. The originary act of self takes place in what Kierkegaard refers to as the moment or instant [*Øieblikket*]. According to Kierkegaard, "in the individual life, anxiety is the instant [moment]" (*CA* 81). This originary anxiety is thus the event through which the self breaks with the supposed innocence of immediacy and finds itself un-grounded in its experience of radical freedom and possibility. Through this process the self becomes aware of the abyssal freedom at the heart of its own existence and of the very structure of reality in general.

Understanding this critique of the position of innocence, which equates to immediacy at the philosophical level, requires that we further explicate the manner in which Kierkegaard uses the concept of sin in this text. In particular I will attempt to disassociate this concept from its traditional theological and moral implications. When Kierkegaard discusses sin in *CA*, he is not intending to initiate a pious discourse on Christian morality. Instead, sin is a psychological category, meaning it is concerned with spirit, and one that carries an ontological significance as well, as Kierkegaard states:

The subject of which psychology treats must be something in repose that remains in a restless repose, not something restless that always either produces itself or is repressed. But this abiding something out of which sin constantly arises, not by necessity (for a becoming by necessity is a state, as, for example the whole history of the plant is a state) but by freedom- this abiding something, this predisposing presupposition, sin's real possibility, is a subject of interest for psychology (*CA* 21).

Now, the first thing to note about this passage is once again that by psychology Kierkegaard is referring to the study of subjective spirit, which is the study of freedom. He notes here that this abiding something, out of which sin constantly arises, is not something that comes to be out of necessity but wholly by freedom. He refers to this abiding something as this 'predisposing presupposition', and says that this is 'sin's real possibility.' Here he is distinguishing a 'restless repose' from something restless that produces itself; put otherwise, between a freedom that makes no claim to any sort of historical necessity and the sin of presupposing that one is grounded in their own activity outside of the restlessness of freedom.

This is why Kierkegaard will move on to note that while psychology has been called the doctrine of subjective spirit, when pursued in regards of sin, it will pass over into the doctrine of absolute spirit. What we can gather from this is that through a psychological investigation into the nature and origin of sin in the individual, we end up in the realm of absolute spirit. Put more succinctly, by investigating the nature of subjective freedom we move into an exploration of the ontological grounds of this subjective freedom. This is a crucial notion for the aims of the present work, as one of my fundamental claims will be that Kierkegaard's explicit theory of subjective consciousness and spirit contains an implicit ontological structure that accounts for this freedom.

It is also important to note what Kierkegaard means when he writes that “the whole race participates in the individual and the individual in the whole race” (*CA* 28). He makes this comment in a discussion of Adam’s sin in which he outlines what it means to say that his sin is hereditary. Theological connotations aside, here Kierkegaard points out that no human is brought into existence divorced from a particular historical situation. While we are free on a subjective level, this freedom does not allow us to exist outside of the historical conditions of the human race. Kierkegaard goes on to state that “at every moment, the individual is both himself and the race” (*CA* 28), so our freedom is always held in tension with the historical conditions created by humanity in general. Kierkegaard goes on to note that:

This is man’s perfection viewed as a state. It is also a contradiction, but a contradiction is always the expression of a task, and a task is movement, but a movement that as a task is the same as that to which the task is directed is an historical movement (*CA* 28-29).

As we have already seen, at least in part, Kierkegaard considers the relationship within consciousness itself to be a contradiction, and this internal contradiction is what produces the movement of freedom within the individual. The individual is subsequently held in contradiction with the history of the whole human race, and once again, this contradiction leads to a task, which is a movement. In this sense we see a move from the responsibility to be oneself present in Kierkegaard’s theory of consciousness to the task of participating in the whole of history inaugurated in the contradiction between the individual and the historical human race. This emphasis on the manner in which the individual is historically situated should serve as a sign that Kierkegaard does not simply believe in the ‘absolute freedom’ of the individual in a crass existentialist sense, but is keenly aware of the historical facticity that each individual human is a part of. As he states, “perfection in oneself is

therefore perfect participation in the whole” (CA 29). Adam is thus significant as he, as the first human being, “is at once himself and the race” (CA 29). At the same time, Kierkegaard notes that Adam is not ‘outside of the race’, and that subsequent humanity is historically linked to this first individual and his first sin.

To begin to further understand the place of sin for Kierkegaard, we must first consider the concept of innocence. Kierkegaard’s use of innocence is his ethical match for the idealist notion of immediacy, which for Kierkegaard can belong only to the operations of logic (CA 35). According to Kierkegaard, “in innocence, man is not qualified a spirit but is psychically qualified in immediate unity with his natural condition” (CA 41). This picture of man is prior to both sin and the instant of self-positing. Kangas describes this innocence as “a state that hovers between being and non-being—a pre-differentiated, virtual, or dreamlike state.”¹¹⁰ Kierkegaard goes on to state “dreamily the spirit projects its own actuality, but this actuality is nothing, and innocence always sees this nothing outside itself” (CA 41). This state of innocence is, according to Kierkegaard, ignorance; but not ignorance of something, but rather an ignorance of the self as such and an ignorance of the actual possibility and necessity located outside of this dreamlike state. Kierkegaard’s aim here is to articulate the state of the self prior to its moment of self-positing, which is innocence. In this state there is no awareness of freedom or possibility and the model of the innocent self could rightly be called non-dialectical, as the self has yet to be awoken from its existential slumber and has yet to begin the process of becoming which qualifies the self as spirit.

Kierkegaard next reveals the ‘profound secret of innocence’, that it is at the same time anxiety. But if innocence is not yet the fully realized self, what sort of anxiety is experienced in innocence? According to Kierkegaard:

¹¹⁰ Kangas, *Kierkegaard’s Instant*, p. 165.

The actuality of the spirit constantly shows itself as a form that tempts its possibility but disappears as soon as it seeks to grasp for it, and it is a nothing that can only bring anxiety (CA 42).

Kierkegaard notes that in innocence, spirit relates to itself as the pure possibility of possibility, and as Kangas points out, this “innocence is groundless and whyless.”¹¹¹ Kierkegaard then goes on to note the importance of this initial appearance of anxiety in innocence:

That anxiety makes its appearance is the pivot upon which everything turns. Man is a synthesis of the psychical and the physical; however, a synthesis is unthinkable if the two are not united in a third. This third is spirit (CA 43).

This is a crucial moment not only for Kierkegaard’s development of anxiety, but also for the underlying ontology of the self that emerges in this work. As Kierkegaard develops this account of the structure of subjectivity, man is made up of both a physical and psychical aspect that are able to relate to each other only in relation to spirit. This third, spirit, is what allows the absolutely opposed elements of the psychical (the subjective) and the physical (the objective) to relate. In innocence spirit is not fully actualized, or put in motion, but present as ‘immediate’ or ‘dreaming’ (CA 43). In this state innocence is anxiety, because it is ignorance about nothing. Kierkegaard goes on to state, “innocence still is, but only a word is required and then ignorance is concentrated” (CA 44). To understand what Kierkegaard means here by saying that ‘only a word is required’ it is necessary that we follow Kierkegaard and recall the biblical account of the first sin of Adam.

¹¹¹ Kangas, *Kierkegaard’s Instant*, p. 166.

In his original state, before his encounter with Eve and the serpent in the garden, Adam was in a state of innocence. He existed in a dreamlike state wherein the only possibility he was aware of was a sheer possibility of possibility itself. He was ignorant about nothing, ignorant about his own possibility as a self. But then came the word, meaning the word of prohibition, ‘the enigmatic word’, according to Kierkegaard (*CA* 44). This is the word of God, which said that Adam could eat from any tree in the garden, except from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This word, the word of prohibition, is the word that awoke ignorance. Whereas before the emergence of this word innocence was ignorant of itself, now it is aware that it can do something, because it was prohibited from doing this very thing. Prohibition had thus awoken desire, as language here creates the space for possibility. According to Kierkegaard, “the prohibition induces in him anxiety, for the prohibition awakes in him freedom’s possibility” (*CA* 44). At this point innocence is reaching its limit, as Kierkegaard says:

The infinite possibility of being able that was awakened by the prohibition now draws closer, because this possibility points to a possibility as its sequence (*CA* 45).

This awoken possibility thus leads to the act of Adam’s original sin. We know that according to the biblical narrative, Adam and Eve (after being persuaded by the serpent) eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and immediately after this act they cover their naked flesh in shame and this is said to be the first sin. But beyond the religious and mythical meaning behind this act, Kierkegaard seems to have a clear philosophical motive in utilizing this notion of sin. By sin Kierkegaard is describing the act by which the self initially posits itself as its own ground through the original act of negation. This is clearly articulated by Kangas:

At the outermost point, facing the *Afgrund* of whylessness – of not having any determinate reason to be, or ground – the self posits itself by making itself into its own ground [...] In this instant it wills its sovereignty over the *Afgrund* by reducing the possibility of possibility to possibility-for-x, some calculable possibility.¹¹²

In this act, the self posits itself as its own ground. This self positing is similar to the previously discussed account of the Fichtean ego, but for Kierkegaard this act of self-positing is not the consummate act of self-realization. At this stage the self encounters the terrifying abyss of freedom and experiences anxiety at this encounter, but subsequently retreats further into itself and attempts to become its own ground. Kierkegaard describes this feeling of anxiety in a passage worth quoting at length:

Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for supposed he had not looked down. Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself (*CA* 61).

At this point the self acts in one of two ways. In the first, which we have previously discussed, the self retreats from the abyss and attempts to posit itself as its own ground. The second option, and the one Kierkegaard associates with a true freedom and positive anxiety, is the refusal of self-positing and an affirmation of the abyssal nature of freedom. Kierkegaard describes this process as an ‘absolute sinking’:

¹¹² Kangas, *Kierkegaard's Instant*, p. 167.

He sank absolutely, but then in turn he emerged from the depth of the abyss lighter than all the troublesome and terrible things in life (*CA* 158).

In this absolute sinking, the self affirms its inability to remain identical to itself, and in this instant an irrevocable parting of the self from itself takes place. Kierkegaard exemplifies this in the text:

Thus when Ingeborg looks out over the sea after Frithiof, this is a picture of what is expressed in the figurative word. An outburst of her emotion, a sigh or a word, already has as a sound more of the determination of time and is more present as something that is vanishing and does not have in it so much of the presence of the eternal. For this reason a sigh, a word, etc. have power to relieve the soul of the burdensome weight, precisely because the burden, when merely expressed, already begins to become something of the past (*CA* 87).

Kangas offers an explanation of the significance of this passage:

This refers to the moment in *Frithiof's Saga* where Ingeborg watches her lover disappear over the horizon – a parting that turns out to be irrevocable. Vigilius could hardly have selected a better image to capture the ambiguity of the instant: time and eternity part, like two lovers, whose only connection then becomes that of desire. The desire, inseparable from a 'burdensome weight', arises in the parting – desire as a relation without relation, a synthesis that does not *syn*-thesize [...] Frithiof's glance becomes commensurate with the eternal only

in the irreparable loss of its object: irreparability is the eternal cut into the present, the fateful conflict.¹¹³

This passage is crucial as it highlights the manner in which the affirmation of freedom signifies an irreparable cut with not only the present structure of temporal representation, but also a break between the self and its foundation that can never be repaired. Rather than rely on itself for a sense of ground, Kierkegaard wants to affirm the absolute loss of ground that comes through an affirmation of freedom's anxiety.

Following this it is worth briefly remarking on the place of Kierkegaard's notion of the instant (or moment), specifically as it functions within *The Concept of Anxiety*. The concept has both ontological and historical-temporal importance throughout this work and much of Kierkegaard's corpus. Kangas gets at the heart of the ontological meaning of the instant when he says:

The instant, in other words, is not allowed to be reduced to mere evanescence or illusion; rather, it is precisely the real. The event is not a *passage* to reality, but reality itself [...] This essential gap, the excessive futurity of the eternal, awakens precisely *anxiety*. And anxiety imposes the most strenuous demand upon the subject.¹¹⁴

It is important to note, first of all, that this notion of the instant as event is one of the crucial moments in which any philosophical reading of Kierkegaard breaks from traditional idealism, as for Kierkegaard the instant always falls outside of all dialectical recuperation in its 'excessive futurity'. Not only is the self originally given to itself in the instant, but also all future possibility and novelty are made possible through the recurrence of the instant. In this moment the gap between the finite

¹¹³ Kangas, *Kierkegaard's Instant*, pp. 185-86.

¹¹⁴ Kangas, *Kierkegaard's Instant*, p. 189.

and infinite, the possible and the necessary and the subjective and the objective is momentarily bridged and reality itself is made present. One could here think of the apostles sighting of Christ on the road to Damascus, in which at the moment they realized they were walking alongside the risen Christ he immediately vanishes from their sight, as the truth can only be experienced in this instantaneous fashion. This instantaneous experience of the real takes on the character of a traumatic encounter that subsequently re-orientes the subject's relation to an uncertain future.

One of the crucial aspects of this concept, which Kangas rightfully points out, is that the instant is not a moment in which one escapes reality, or gets a glimpse of some transcendent plane of other-ness, but is rather the *real itself*. This is why Kierkegaard associates both terror and anxiety with the instant. This also relates to the opening problem of the book, the problem of the origin, or beginning, of self-consciousness. Rather than attempt to provide a logical, or scientific, account for the emergence of self-consciousness, Kierkegaard uses this notion of the instant to point out this primordial event of self which comes before all other finite beginnings.

This notion of the instant is so crucial to a philosophical and systematic understanding of Kierkegaard's authorship because it provides a manner in which to think the possibility of novelty as well as the subjective hope in future possibility while still allowing the overall dialectical structure of the self and reality that is emerging in our reading thus far. The structure of subjectivity and the development of consciousness provided by Kierkegaard are clearly dialectical, but there is always a remainder lying outside the field of what is dialectically recuperable and this remainder is the space from which the instant can emerge.

The instant also expands our understanding of Kierkegaard's relationship to idealism. Kierkegaard says both that "ethics proposes to bring ideality into actuality" and that "ethics points to ideality as a task" (CA 16). Following this we could say that in the instant one encounters the ideal and subsequent to this encounter can take on the task of attempting to actualize ideality. This

happens in the wake of an encounter between two lovers in which there is an instantaneous experience of love, and after this encounter both lovers faithfully attempt to actualize the ideal moment of love they both experienced. The instant takes place in that gap between the ideal and the actual, and just as it offers a glimpse of the ideal with the swiftness of “a blink of the eye” (CA 87), this instant “also points toward that which follows” (CA 81). This momentary experience of ideality that takes place in the instant thus opens up the possibility of a future in which a sequence of actualizing the ideality contained in that instant is made possible. Thus for Kierkegaard it is not the case that we can never speak about the ideal, but for him idealism only signifies that which we can encounter which then inaugurates a subjective trajectory for us. This means that while there may be the possibility of an ideal structure, it is up to us to bring that ideal into actuality through our own activity. We could say that the instant does not merely provided a momentary glimpse of the absolute as some sort of divine ontological vision to be adored or admired, but rather, in this instant reality presents itself as a task which opens up a new trajectory for the life of the subject.

2.5 Freedom

This discussion of the instant leads us into one of the other crucial aspects at play in this text, which is Kierkegaard’s emphasis on freedom. While Kierkegaard’s theorization of freedom is often interpreted in a certain existentialist manner in which freedom simply signifies the lack of any sort of structure or necessary purpose behind existence, I will here show how this is never a merely abstract freedom in which the individual is not constrained by anything other than their own subjective desire, but instead, this freedom is always the entanglement of meaninglessness and possibility as they clash in the structure of the spiritual subject.

We must first note that for Kierkegaard spirit itself *is* freedom, so rather than considering spirit to be a stand in term for human subjectivity in general, or the collective spirit of any society or

group of individuals, spirit itself is the activity of freedom when it operates at the level of consciousness. This awareness, of the fundamental qualification of humanity as spirit, or freedom, is experienced by the individual in the moment of anxiety at which they are made aware that their own being is forever split from its original grounds, and that they can never possess the sort of absolute self autonomy they desire. It is thus in its desire to be wholly immanent and consistent with itself, the sort of subjectivity in which $I=I$, that the subject desperately attempts to avoid the actual conditions of freedom. When the subject is shaken out of its own feeble attempt to exist as its own absolute, it is made fully aware of the abyss of un-pre-thinkable being which forever elides the recuperative activity of its own consciousness. This sort of freedom is thus not something that is socially produced or learned, but is rather an effect of the ontological structure of the self and reality as such. In a sort of structural repetition, the self is both forever disconnected from its objective ontological grounds, and from its own objective being. As we will see in the next section of this chapter, these gaps characterize the fundamental ontological structure of Kierkegaard's thought.

This means that there is no determinate value or consistent system at the ontological level which determines that things will be one way and not another, or which will determine what is and is not possible for the individual. Freedom is rather the realization that it is possibility as such which sits outside of the activity of the subject and forever haunts its attempts to completely wrap its own existence up with some form of consistent and necessary grounding. As Kierkegaard states, "anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility" (*CA* 42). So it is the fact that possibility itself is possible that produces the experience of anxiety in the subject and this anxiety is the actuality of freedom, as if this freedom were not actual then the subject would have nothing to be anxious about.

So the anxiety experienced by the subject as they gaze into the utter whylessness of their own existence is the realization that freedom itself is primary and that this freedom is the pure possibility of possibility, meaning, the lack of any determinate ground or reason at the heart of

existence or experience. This freedom is subsequently characterized by no inherent value or necessary content, and one cannot say that this ontological freedom leads to anything necessarily good nor anything necessarily evil, both are possible. Kierkegaard goes on to describe the entanglement that characterizes this sort of freedom:

Anxiety is neither a category of necessity nor a category of freedom; it is entangled freedom, where freedom is not free in itself but entangled, not by necessity, but in itself. If sin has come into the world by necessity (which is a contradiction) there can be no anxiety (*CA* 49).

This concept, ‘entangled freedom’, is crucial to our understanding of the structure of subjectivity and freedom for Kierkegaard, as it notes the manner in which anxiety signifies a restriction of freedom in itself; put differently, freedom is never just a pure freedom detached from any necessity. Freedom is thus always entangled inasmuch as our own activity is always entangled with the abyss of freedom lying outside our own existence. We can never simply be free in an abstract sense, as our lives will always involve some sort of activity or project in which we aim at a sort of consistency, but the anxiety of freedom will always accompany us on this journey towards consistency. As Kierkegaard goes on to note, “in the moment actuality is posited, possibility walks by its side as a nothing that entices every thoughtless man” (*CA* 49). Thus freedom is not just a pure possibility, but a possibility haunted by a nothing that reminds us that things could always be otherwise. This nothing is in a sense the constant reminder of a fundamental tension, or instability, at the heart of reality. So when an individual actualizes a possibility in a particular project this nothing is a reminder of the possibility for failure or disaster in their attempt at actualization. The only consistent aspect for the subject’s existence is thus this experience of anxiety as the tension between the actualization

of a possibility and the nothingness, or pure possibility-of-possibility, which forever disturbs the subject's aspirations towards consistency and autonomy.

Following this, we see that the experience of anxiety further indicates that freedom is ontologically primary, not something that is merely the product of the subject's mis-relation to a consistent and necessary structure of being, but rather something indicated by the fact that the only sort of relation one can have to reality is a mis-relation in which there can never be a consistency, or synthetic relation, between self and world, or even self and self. Freedom thus operates at the level of both the ontological and in the realm of consciousness for Kierkegaard. Ontologically, freedom is evident in our inability to ever escape the absolute possibility at the heart of being and subsequently in the impossibility of our attempts to absolutely negate ontological being in the hopes of being wholly self-autonomous. While the next chapter will be primarily concerned with the effects of this ontological freedom on the development of human consciousness, we can for the time being see that the same mis-relation, or inconsistency, which functions between the subject and reality is equally present within the internal operations of individual consciousness. The subject never simply 'is what it is', as the gaps in its own structure make possibility ever present. In this sense we can say that freedom is the terrifying experience of realizing that one is responsible for their own existence while at the same time realizing that they lack any sort of access to a consistent ontological structure which could provide a stable and explanatory system in which to ground their actual existence and activity.

This freedom is the underlying cause of anxiety, and Kierkegaard acknowledges that the effects of anxiety are not constrained to the experience of individual subjects, but instead that anxiety is so pervasive that it has both objective and subjective effects. I will now briefly give an overview of the distinction drawn between these different forms, or effects, of anxiety.

While thus far anxiety has been discussed in a wholly subjective manner as that which is experienced by the individuals when facing the utter possibility and whylessness at the heart of their own existence, Kierkegaard briefly notes that there is also an objective form of anxiety. By this term, objective anxiety, Kierkegaard means “the reflection of sinfulness of the generation in the whole world” (*CA* 57). Thus, the anxiety of individuals has left its trace on the world as a whole. Stephen Dunning refers to this as such, “...objective anxiety, [is] a for-itself moment in which the self projects its anxiety onto creation, which is the nonhuman other.”¹¹⁵ For example, if anxiety has led some individuals in history to want to exist as their own foundation outside of their contingent historical conditions, they may have developed ways of existing, both personally and politically, which bear the mark of this anxiety. For example, any sort of nationalism, racism or sexism in which a group wants to make their particular existence foundational would bear the mark of an anxiety obsessed with a desire to build a wall around what, or whom, ‘counts’ and what does not. In philosophical terms this often leads to the denial of the possibility-of-possibility and an insistence on strict logical necessity. In historical terms this means that we are never disconnected from the historical sequences and events that precede our coming to exist. Kierkegaard goes on to point out that objective anxiety is not just the reflection of sin in the (human) generation, but is also “the effect of sin in nonhuman existence” (*CA* 57), so sin not only leaves a trace on the whole of human history, but equally on non-human creation. While he says little else about what could be called ‘nature’ in his authorship, here Kierkegaard is pointing out that the structure of nature itself contains a sense of ‘longing’ and ‘anxiety’ akin to what is experienced at the anthropological level by the human. After noting that some members of ‘Schelling’s School’ (*CA* 59) also think that sin has altered nature, he quickly ends the discussion, stating; “however, at this point I break off the

¹¹⁵ Dunning, ‘Kierkegaard’s Systematic Analysis of Anxiety’, p. 18.

digression, which for a moment I permitted to go beyond the boundary of this investigation” (CA 60).

If objective anxiety is the effect of sin on the human race as a whole as well as on non-human creation, subjective anxiety is exactly what it sounds like, the effect of sin on individual subjectivity. Kierkegaard compares anxiety with dizziness, and in particular equates this subjective experience of dizziness with the awareness of freedom. This occurs when the individual gazes for a moment into the abyss of freedom and subsequently attempts to “lay hold of finiteness to support itself” (CA 61). He notes that in this instant “everything is changed” (CA 61), and that between these two moments (the moment of gazing into the yawning abyss and of self-positing in response to this) there is the leap. The anxiety and guilt produced in this moment are the products of the self momentarily gazing into the abyss of absolute ground-less possibility and subsequently attempting to hold on to something finite to re-ground him or herself. It is important to note that that which produces this anxiety is precisely nothing, but because of the anxious subjective response this nothing becomes “more and more a something” (CA 61). Kierkegaard spends a bit of effort in outlining what exactly this nothing that becomes a something is. Nothing produces something through anxiety about the possibility of anxiety that produces sin as a furthering of the initial act of negation by which the self attempts to exist independently from anything outside of itself. This is why the initially anxious response to the experience of a nothing existing outside of the recuperative activity of the subject is capable of becoming ‘more and more a something’, as through the repetition of negation sin continues to grow as the anxiety over sin produces sin itself. Thus, reflecting on sin produces sin, so there must be some sort of break in this cycle if one is to ever break from the wholly negative activity of sin. Freedom, and in particular the free activity of faith, allow one to break free from this cycle of sin. This emphasis on the negative and positive elements of anxiety and freedom lead Kierkegaard to a crucial emphasis on the foundations of good and evil.

2.6 Good and Evil

The previous discussion of freedom is crucial and it lays the groundwork for the important distinction between good and evil Kierkegaard lays out in this text, as freedom operates in response to the possibility of possibility which makes neither good nor evil absolute or necessary. This is thus a further mark of the contingency at the heart of Kierkegaard's ontology, and only under conditions of absolute freedom are good and evil equally possible.

To say that reality is inherently contingent (or, inconsistent) means to equally say that there is no absolute good, or evil, at the core of being. Thus, we could not say in a religious fashion that God is the absolute and that subsequently the absolute is in-itself Good. Instead, we could say that the core of being is characterized by contingency, or put otherwise, absolute indifference. This is a shift between necessity and contingency being ontologically primary, as to say that Good is ontologically primary, or necessary, would be to place an absolute necessity at the core of existence, and thus good would be primary and evil would only be defined by a lack of the Good that is ontologically primary, which would be an Augustinian view on evil. To say that contingency, or indifference, is ontologically primary is to instead say that both good and evil are secondary to an absolute contingency at the heart of being. This is also to say that both good and evil are equally possible and equally contingent, as neither is necessary while both are possible. Each has to be actualized in freedom through the decisive activity of the individual. In more explicitly theological terms, Marcus Pound has remarked, "Kierkegaard's God is not invoked as a neurotic defence [sic] of difference, but is instead the very principle *of* difference."¹¹⁶ Thus, placing God at the heart of being does not imply that the goodness of the divine is ontologically primary and that evil is subsequently

¹¹⁶ Marcus Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis and Trauma* (London: SCM Press, 2007), p. 85.

a deprivation of this good, but rather that God represents the very principle of difference at the heart of being.

This connects back to the primacy of anxiety in the human experience of this freedom. While Kierkegaard's example of 'gazing into the abyss' may seem more esoteric than any experience the average person is familiar with, most can relate to the experience of driving a car down a highway. While at first this may not strike one as the sort of experience that would lead to the experience of a terrifying ontology of freedom and subsequent anxiety, one only needs to think about the real freedom involved in this experience. When I drive down a highway in my car, there is nothing necessary about my existence that means I will necessarily drive safely and stay in my own lane. At the same moment I am doing all that I can to ensure the safety of myself and other drivers on the road, I become aware that in a split second I could simply move the steering wheel violently to the left while increasing pressure on the gas pedal to initiate an accident that would likely kill myself and a multiple of others in an act of senseless evil. While this may sound extreme, this terrifying freedom is at the core of many of the activities we carry out on a regular basis. This is why, in a certain sense, we find certain acts, such as the senseless shooting of innocent movie goers or school children by a lone gunman so terrifying; not because of the sheer and unimaginable horror of the violence itself, but rather because of the fact that these senseless events could happen at any moment. All it takes is one individual making one decision to initiate terrible acts such as these. This is the true and anxiety inducing nature of human freedom. We often act as if we live in a well ordered world in which the simple following of natural necessity will keep us out of harm's way, while in reality we are engaged in a contingent and why-less experiment in which one meaningless act can throw the whole thing off balance.

This example, of the anxiety experienced when we realize that our own freedom carries with it the possibility for evil acts, is what Kierkegaard refers to as "anxiety about evil" (*CA* 131). This is

the anxiety experienced by the awareness that I am capable of senseless and meaningless evil and that it is up to my own volition to avoid this temptation. While this may sound like a negative thing, Kierkegaard says that this is the sort of anxiety experienced by one who is ‘in the good’, as their desire to avoid falling into evil leads to an anxiety over evil acts. The example of a recovering alcoholic can help exemplify this sort of anxiety. If one recovering from the evil of alcoholism is attending a wedding with an open bar, they will likely experience an overwhelming anxiety when they look around and see everyone enjoying cocktails and toasting glasses of champagne. This experience will make them aware of the possibility of having a drink and this possibility of transgression will lead to an intense experience of anxiety, but this anxiety is aimed at maintaining the good they have accomplished through their recovery from alcoholism. Thus, even when one is aiming towards the good, evil and transgression remain possibilities, and anxiety serves as the means by which one is always open the contingent possibilities of both good and evil. This anxiety is what emerges when one is aware that the continued presence of an infinite freedom which ‘arises out of nothing’ means that even where good is present, evil is always possible. As Kierkegaard states, “anxiety is at this point always present as the possibility of a new state” (*CA* 115). This activity of constantly choosing the good in the face of the temptation for evil is what Kierkegaard refers to as the act of faith:

The only thing that is truly able to disarm the sophistry of sin is faith, courage to believe that the state itself is a new sin, courage to renounce anxiety without anxiety, which only faith can do; faith does not thereby annihilate anxiety, but, itself eternally young, it extricates itself from anxiety’s moment of death. Only faith is able to do this, for only in faith is the synthesis eternal and at every moment possible (*CA* 117).

On the other hand Kierkegaard discusses another sort of anxiety, which is ‘anxiety about the Good’, which he also refers to as ‘the demonic’. This is the sort of anxiety experienced by one who is living ‘in evil’, which means that they have attempted to close off existence from all possibility and contingency and have attempted to live a consistent mode of existence in which things ‘just are’ a certain way. In this case, the demonic signifies the inclosing of freedom, the building of barriers around a certain sort of existence and subjectivity. In opposition to this is the good, which, “of course, signifies the restoration of freedom, redemption, salvation, or whatever one would call it” (CA 119). This desire to close existence off from possibility and freedom is what Kierkegaard means by the demonic, as “the demonic is un-freedom that wants to close itself off” (CA 123). This attempt to build a barrier around possibility is in complete opposition to an ontology of freedom, as “freedom is precisely the expansive” (CA 123). In terms that help to pre-figure the political reading of this distinction which I will briefly discuss at the end of this chapter, Kierkegaard goes on to state that, “as long as freedom does not defect to the party of the rebels, the anxiety of revolution will still be present, not as anxiety about the good, but an anxiety about evil” (CA 136).

To place this distinction (between anxiety about evil and anxiety about the good) in the clearest terms possible, anxiety has to do with the relation of the subject to the possibility-of-possibility, which signifies an absolute freedom, contained in reality. Anxiety about evil is the basic awareness that things could always be otherwise, and that one has to work and strive to continue their existential trajectory, while anxiety about the good is an attempt to negate the possibility of things being otherwise by attempting to close off possibility in a set of determinate coordinates. In ontological terms, anxiety about evil functions against the backdrop of a reality that is engaged in the process of becoming, while anxiety about the good assumes a reality in which everything is settled and finished.

This discussion of good and evil in *CA* not only serves the purpose of showing the psychological affects of various conceptions of the ontological possibility of freedom, but will also lay the groundwork for my political reading of Kierkegaard, as well as allowing a clear link between Kierkegaard and Schelling's conceptions of the ontological and the grounds of human freedom. As I outlined in chapter one, in Schelling's *Freedom Essay* he argues that for good and evil to be equally possible there must be an absolute indifference, or *urgrund* at the heart of being which makes contingency (rather than necessity) absolutely primary. This can be seen as a critique of his former friend Hegel's attempt to begin from a monistic absolute. Thus Schelling pushes freedom a step further than 'God' or 'the Absolute' and instead claims that there is an un-pre-thinkable ground of being, which is a point of absolute indifference or contingency, which precedes the supposed conceptual and ontological stability offered by conceptions of the absolute. Through a brief consideration of Schelling and Kierkegaard's conceptions of freedom, I will show that the primary difference comes down to their conceptions of the divine.

In a manner similar to Kierkegaard's argument in this text, Schelling argues in the *Freedom Essay* that rather than some positive concept of the divine residing at the core of being, there is instead an absolute indifference which pre-exists a positive conception of the divine, or the good. This absolute indifference (or, *urgrund*) is what creates the space and conditions for the sort of ontological freedom that enables good and evil to exist as equally possible activities.

As Vasiliki Tsakiri argues, "the concept of freedom in Schelling functions in the same way as the *concept of anxiety* does in Kierkegaard, eluding definition and acquiring a primordial meaning. Anxiety and freedom are thus interwoven in both Kierkegaard's and Schelling's philosophies."¹¹⁷ Following this it is worth further analyzing the ontological and systematic similarity between Kierkegaard and Schelling's conceptions of the grounds of freedom and anxiety, as this provides a historical link

¹¹⁷ Vasiliki Tsakiri, *Kierkegaard: Anxiety, Repetition and Contemporaneity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 87.

between Kierkegaard and German idealism, as well as a conceptual link between Kierkegaard and contemporary materialist re-articulation of the idealist project.

One of the crucial differences still remaining between the thought of Schelling and Kierkegaard in regards to freedom is the manner in which Schelling takes the step of placing a sort of primordial naturalism underneath any concept of the divine, so that nature is still primary. By this I mean that before the emergence of any positive notion of the divine there exists an absolutely indifferent void at the core of being, nothing but a set of contracting and expanding drives which serve as the pre-conditions for the emergence of the divine. In a certain sense, it is as if Schelling provides a primordially naturalist account of the emergence of God. On this point, it would be fair to say that Kierkegaard would be critical of this naturalist theology due to his own lingering supernaturalism. By using the term supernatural in this sense I mean that Kierkegaard would not be content with any attempt to explain the divine in terms that could be reduced to any sort of naturalist or scientific phenomenon or logic. The divine signifies precisely that which lies outside the realm of the scientific and logical for Kierkegaard, and this sort of naturalist account of the grounds of the divine wanders into the dangerous territory where logical operations attempt to fully comprehend the landscape of existential actuality.

Slavoj Žižek's analysis of Schelling's concept of freedom is useful here, as whether he intends it or not, he cast Schelling's project in a materialist fashion in terms that bring it into close proximity to that of Kierkegaard. In the opening lines of his *The Indivisible Remainder* Žižek states:

How, then, should one begin an essay on Schelling? Perhaps the most appropriate way is by focusing on the *problem of beginning itself*, the crucial problem of German idealism [...]"¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 13.

He goes on to argue that:

Schelling's 'materialist' contribution is best epitomized by his fundamental thesis according to which, to put it bluntly, *the true Beginning is not at the beginning*: there is something that precedes the Beginning itself - a rotary motion whose vicious cycle is broken, in a gesture analogous to the cutting of the Gordian knot, by the Beginning proper, that is, the primordial act of decision."¹¹⁹

At this point we can note two things. First, that the problem of absolute beginning, which Žižek characterizes as the crucial problem of German idealism, is the core ontological issue which characterizes Schelling's ontology of freedom and Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety. Second, we can see that according to Žižek, the true beginning is comparable to an irreparable 'cut' or primordial act of decision. In this sense it seems as if Schelling takes the importance of decision a level deeper than Kierkegaard, as rather than making decision the primordial moment of the development of subjectivity or consciousness, it is an act of decision itself that opens up the ontological space for the development of human freedom. Following this we could say that the capacity for human decision is only made possible by a primordial divine act in which an absolute cut or break opens up the space for freedom in human history. Žižek goes on to cast this primordial act in more theological terms when he states that "the beginning thus occurs when one 'finds the word' which breaks the deadlock, the vicious cycle, of empty and confused ruminations."¹²⁰ This is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's discussion of spirit's break from innocence when he states that:

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 14.

Innocence still is, but only a word is required and then ignorance is concentrated. Innocence naturally cannot understand this word, but at that moment anxiety has, as it were, caught its first prey. Instead of nothing, it now has an enigmatic word (*CA* 44).

For Kierkegaard this word is the initial prohibition given to Adam by God that awoke desire in Adam at the moment he was made aware of freedom's possibility through an experience of anxiety. This word signifies the externalization of the divine in language and opens up the irreparable split between the absolute and the particular (or, the ideal and the actual), a space in which freedom and the becoming of consciousness take place. It thus seems that both Schelling and Kierkegaard ground freedom, and the subsequent experience of anxiety, in the externalization of the divine in the original word. As Pound argues, "it is precisely because language negates empirical reality that Kierkegaard accounts for doubt and its integrity to consciousness", and further, "it is this very contradiction between language and empirical reality that gives rise to consciousness."¹²¹ To more clearly articulate the stakes of this externalization of the divine, or ideal, Pound argues that, "language cancels the immediacy of raw sensation because language is an 'ideality'. That is to say, language uses universal or ideal terms to talk about the particular [...]."¹²² In this sense language can never be identical with the actuality of immediate experience, and thus always operates as a negation of ideality.

This irrevocable break with immediacy, which we have already analyzed in terms of Kierkegaard's *CA*, is also accounted for by Schelling's ontology of freedom, as Žižek points out:

For Schelling, then, the primordial, radically contingent fact, a fact which can in no way be accounted for, is freedom itself, a freedom bound by nothing, a freedom which, in a sense, *is*

¹²¹ Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis and Trauma*, p. 80.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

Nothing; and the problem is, rather, how this Nothing of the abyss of primordial freedom becomes entangled in the causal chains of Reason.¹²³

It is once again striking how close this analysis of the role of freedom in Schelling mirrors the previously discussed account of freedom and its grounds for Kierkegaard. It is particularly striking that Žižek refers to the manner in which primordial freedom ‘becomes entangled’ with the causal chains of reason, as this is almost precisely what Kierkegaard describes with his own conception of ‘entangled freedom’ in *CA*. As if he intended to make the comparison with Kierkegaard even more apparent, Žižek then goes on to discuss the manner in which the experience of freedom, as conceived by Schelling, involves the constant tension between good and evil along with the experience of an anxiety produced by this tension:

[...] Rather, it concerns the most concrete experience of the tension within a living, acting and suffering person between Good and Evil - there is no actual freedom without an unbearable anxiety.¹²⁴

He then goes on to explain the relation between freedom and emergence of spirit in Schelling. Of particular importance to this study is the manner in which Žižek refers to Schelling’s conception of freedom as ‘the moment of eternity’, the same language Kierkegaard uses to refer to the instant (or, moment), a concept previously outlined in this chapter. As Žižek describes it:

¹²³ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, p. 16.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

The emergence of Freedom means that Spirit has posited itself as such in opposition to its impenetrable-inert Ground [...] that is to say, Spirit is no longer determined by the network of causality. Freedom is thus *stricto sensu* the moment of eternity [...].¹²⁵

Finally, in a manner which immediately brings to mind Kierkegaard's conception of the instant, in which the infinite and finite are instantaneously, and paradoxically, re-united in the 'blink of an eye', Žižek describes the manner in which an act of freedom for Schelling consist of a similar reunion with the absolute:

In the experience of freedom [...] we 'rejoin the Absolute' - that is, we re-establish contact - our identity, even - with the primordial origin outside temporal reality, with the abyss of eternity prior to the fall into the world of creatures.¹²⁶

While Žižek's materialist reading of Schelling's theory of freedom provides many avenues of clear comparison with Kierkegaard, a clear point of distinction between Schelling and Kierkegaard in their respective understandings of freedom has to do with the precise place of the grounds of freedom. We have seen that for Schelling, the non-grounds for freedom and the possibility of good and evil absolutely *precede* the emergence of the divine. For Kierkegaard, as we will see ever more clearly in the next chapter, the divine itself serves as the non-ground which opens up the possibility of possibility itself. This is why Kierkegaard would not see the purpose of placing a non-ground of indifference before the emergence of the divine, as the divine itself is this non-ground of indifference. As I will argue in the next chapter, God is not a separate entity from the contingent

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 20.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

and dynamic structure of being that underlies Kierkegaard's thought, but instead, God *is* this ontological openness.

2.7 A Fractured Dialectic

Now that I have outlined my systematic reading of Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* and have shown the manner in which this text serves as the first moment in Kierkegaard's critical re-working of the philosophy of idealism, I would like to focus on the ontological implications of this reading. In particular, I would like to highlight the underlying ontological conditions which create the space for what I would like to call a fractured dialectic, meaning a non-totalizable account of dialectical structure that does not emerge from, or arrive at, a synthetic unity of opposites. To put it differently, the analysis of this text serves as the primary ontological moment in the development of Kierkegaard's underlying philosophical system, whereas *The Sickness Unto Death* builds upon this ontology by drawing out the anthropological implications and *Works of Love* unifies the ontological, the anthropological and the ethical through Kierkegaard's unique version of absolute knowing.

I will use the term fractured dialectic to describe Kierkegaard's unique ontological position as it describes a structure that is dialectical in nature while holding to the position that fracture, not unity, is ontologically primary. Paul Ricoeur initially coined this term¹²⁷ in an essay in which he makes the claim that:

At any rate a fresh interpretation of Kierkegaard must certainly entail a reconsideration of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel himself.¹²⁸

And;

A new approach to Kierkegaard must also be a new approach to German idealism.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Ricoeur, 'Philosophy after Kierkegaard'

¹²⁸ Ricoeur, 'Philosophy after Kierkegaard', p. 11.

For Ricoeur, Kierkegaard's position does not represent an anti-philosophical reaction against the tenets of German idealism, but rather should be approached as a unique re-working of the developments made by the idealists which gives a full consideration to the actuality of human freedom within systematic philosophy. Much of the present work could be seen as an attempt to provide a full-scale treatment of the interpretation outlined by Ricoeur in his short essay.

By fractured dialectic I am aiming to differentiate my reading from the standard version of idealist dialectics in which the point of departure is the absolute immanent monism of substance, which is then split into subject and substance and in which subject finally reconciles back into substance in a moment of higher unity and absolute knowing. Rather than making unity the absolute moment that both begins and completes the dialectical process, Kierkegaard's fractured dialectic places fracture at the beginning of the dialectical process. Thus fracture is not a deficiency of our own understanding that can only be overcome through a higher order metaphysical knowledge, it is instead the primary characteristic of the real in-itself. As Kierkegaard states in *The Concept of Anxiety*:

Every science lies either in a logical immanence or in an immanence within a transcendence that it is unable to explain. Now sin is precisely that transcendence, that [crisis] in which sin enters into the single individual as the single individual (CA 50).

The ontological dichotomy Kierkegaard sets up here is one between a 'logical immanence', by which he means a system of absolute knowing in which the rational faculty can comprehensively grasp the whole of actuality and an 'immanence within transcendence', by which he means an immanent

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

account of actuality and subjectivity which is absolutely preceded by an event outside of the recuperative activity of its own rational faculties. This 'immanence within transcendence' is thus open to the unknowable possibility of the future, as it makes no claim to being able to rationally account for that that precedes its own emergence. This is very similar to what Schelling refers to as un-pre-thinkable being, as this logical immanence similarly posits as absolute which is forever preceding the circle of logical reflection and its recuperative capacities.

It is thus my contention that one of the primary stakes of this ontological dichotomy is to do with Kierkegaard's emphasis on the concept of contingency (or, *the actuality of contingency*). As I have already shown, one of Kierkegaard's primary criticisms of any sort of idealism that equates the operations of logic with the experience of lived actuality is that it contains a category [contingency] that cannot be contained, or assimilated, within logic. Contingency signifies a lack of unifying reason behind the development of both actuality and subjectivity along with the possibility that things could always be otherwise. Acknowledging the contingency at the heart of actuality is equally acknowledging the lack of a unifying force of reason capable of providing logical science with a totalizing explanatory framework.

Contingency thus signifies that our immanent and immediate conditions are always capable of being transcended by something wholly novel and external that disrupts established conditions of possibility and logic. This is why Kierkegaard often equates contingency with the religious, as in the example of Christ, a particular event (the incarnation) must either be outright rejected as untrue, or must instead force one to re-orient their own field of logical and ontological possibility. Either Christ is not truly both God and Man, or Christ is both God and Man and we must now re-consider what is and is not truly possible. A less theologically contentious example would be the French revolution. In the time preceding this event, it seemed logically impossible for the average French farmer or peasant that anything other than a monarchical rule was possible, but through the

contingent uprising of the Jacobin party and the subsequent revolution, the field of logical possibilities was altered so that now a republic founded on justice and equality was able to overcome an ages old monarchy. While many more examples could be made, the important point is that this ontological emphasis on contingency and possibility leave open the possibility that another world is always possible and along with this, another way of orienting one's subjective position within the world.

It is important to note, however, that this contingency is not conflated with any sort of religious mysticism which simply holds that some divine power exists outside of the limits of our own knowing which makes 'magic' possible. Instead, contingency is grounded in the abyss (*Afgrund*), which resides at the very core of the structure of being. We can again think about Kierkegaard's concept of the instant (or, moment). This concept signifies the subjective appropriation of contingency and the manner in which the acceptance of the non-ground, which creates the conditions for both good and evil, is what opens up the space in which anything is possible, and present conditions can always change. Rather than consider what Kierkegaard is doing as a metaphysics of religion, I would like to consider this project an ontology of contingency, meaning that the point is not that there is some consistent and reasonable structure which forever transcends our knowing (a more-or-less Kantian metaphysic) but rather that there is no consistent and absolute structure to be known in the first place. To repeat a quote used in the introduction, this leads one commentator to state that for Kierkegaard:

No abyss sunders us, the knowing subjects, from reality, but rather reality itself is incessantly fractured between the actual and the possible, and within this rift 'subjectivity' comes to be/becomes possible.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ John Milbank, 'The Sublime in Kierkegaard', p. 303.

Thus, it is not the case that there is a fracture between our subjectivity and the ‘true’ structure of reality as it exist in-itself, or between the absolute immanence of our experience and the transcendence of the absolute. Rather, there is a fracture at the core of reality itself, and this creates the fractured dialectic in which the conditions for subjective freedom, or spirit, are opened up. It is important to note that this fractured dialectic differs from the standard view of dialectics inasmuch as fracture, and not absolute unity, is the primary term at play. For Kierkegaard, it is not the case that there is a dialectical gap that can thus be metaphysically overcome in a moment of sublation or synthesis. Instead, this fracture is a feature of reality itself and not just a lack to be overcome by our own logical faculties. The reason this is so important for Kierkegaard is that if this fracture is not primary, then we lack the conditions for a truly free account of human subjectivity, as any account of a unifying spirit, reason or divinity behind our activity takes away the space for decision and free activity. This fracture is the condition for the emergence of spirit and the possibility of willed subjective activity. As the same commentator goes on to state, “this new bridge thrown across the abyss is not the work of the abyss, but of willed, contingent subjectivity.”¹³¹ This space of fracture, or abyss, is the very feature of reality which necessitates the existence of free and willed subjective activity and this primordial space of fracture, or lack, is what creates the conditions for the rest of Kierkegaard’s systematic project, including his accounts of freedom, reflection, ethics and love. Now that I have outlined the ontological importance of the argument of *The Concept of Anxiety* and have explained why I am using the term fractured dialectic to describe this ontological structure, I would like to even more explicitly outline the core features of the foundations of Kierkegaard’s ontology.

¹³¹ Milbank, ‘The Sublime in Kierkegaard’, p. 305. It is particularly telling that a Christian theologian (with a commitment to an extremely dogmatic theological metaphysics) makes this comment. Even with that set of presuppositions he still finds that reality itself is characterized by a state of fracture in the work of Kierkegaard.

We begin with the non-ground (*Afgrund*) or abyss at the core of being which signifies the un-pre-thinkable being that we can never logically account for. This non-ground and its lack of unifying totality thus creates the rift at the heart of reality which produces the dialectical contradictions of subject and object, possibility and necessity and infinity and finitude. It is important to once again note that this series of dichotomies is not akin to a consistent totalizing substance splitting apart from itself in a Hegelian manner, but rather signifies the chaotic abyss at the heart of both subject and object. Put differently, the starting point of Kierkegaard's ontology is thoroughly Schellingian, and not Hegelian, even though his subsequent account of the development of spirit is Hegelian in nature.

The primordial fracture creates a struggle between subject and object and as we have seen in the discussion of *CA*, leads to a struggle between the freedom of subjectivity against the facticity and necessity of the objective world. This creates the conditions for sin, which is the activity by which the subject attempts to negate the object after realizing that objectivity will always be there. Sin is an absolute negation, or negation of the absolute, in which the subject says 'I am not *that*' to the realm of objectivity. This act of sin is a separation in which subject absolutely negates object and attempts to be grounded wholly in itself.

Anxiety then emerges when the subject, who has previously committed the act of sin (absolute negation), gazes into the abyss grounding his or her own being and realizes that their own existence is whyless and marked by a chaotic freedom which provides no guarantee of consistency or autonomy. This realization that things could always be otherwise is what creates the experience of anxiety for the subject. Thus, absolute negation (sin) is an attempt of the subject to posit its own existence, but this negation runs into anxiety once the subject realizes there is always an abyss lying outside their own claim to be self-positing. Anxiety can then lead to either an acceptance of the

abyssal ground of possibility preceding his or her own particular existence (which would be good) or a struggle to posit themselves over and against the abyss of possibility (which would be evil).

Freedom is then the acceptance of this abyssal possibility at the heart of being and the sacrifice of any desire of the subject to be its own grounds, or put differently, to move past the irony of thinking that the subject can be self-positing. By accepting this freedom, subject is qualified as spirit, as spirit *is* freedom as the free becoming of subjectivity in its dialectical interactions with objectivity. If sin is the name of the activity by which subjectivity places itself in absolute opposition to objectivity through attempting to serve as its own grounds, faith is then the name marking the activity by which subjectivity accepts the freedom at the core of its own being. Faith is thus the process by which the abyss between subjectivity and objectivity can be crossed. However, this crossing of the abyss is not a logically built structure, like a sort of ontological bridge, but is rather the faithful leap of the subject across this abyss.

While this ontology begins with a clearly Schellingian moment and progresses with a Hegelian structure, it is important to note that Kierkegaard is not just providing a religious synthesis of the projects of two of the most prominent figures in German idealism, but rather, is adding something wholly novel to the trajectory of idealism.

Lived experience is at the heart of Kierkegaard's project and while the structure behind this experience is idealist, it simply serves the role of creating the space for free subjective intervention in the world of (existential) actuality and the actuality of the activity of subjectivity can never be systematized in any sort of logically immanent fashion. Thus, Kierkegaard is not opposed to the idealist tendency to systematize the grounds of existence and the structure of dialectical becoming, but is instead opposed to any instance in which this same systematic logic attempts to account for the willed and contingent activity of individual human beings in actuality. Logic is capable of describing structure; it is not capable of producing the movement of free subjective activity. Along

with this, logic can explain the structure inherent to reality, but cannot make anything happen. Logic does not produce movement, decisive subjective activity does. The journey towards religious existence is something individuals must attain for themselves; the logical structure of reality does not accomplish this on its own.

This also shows the error in the tendency to read Kierkegaard's *existentialism* as placing him firmly against any attempt at a *systematic* or *idealist* philosophy. Rather than this serving as some absolute either/or placing Kierkegaard clearly outside the lineage of idealist and systematic philosophy, he represents a both/and. Kierkegaard offers a thoroughly systematic account of the grounds of reality and subjectivity and uses this systematic account to clear the space for a rigorously existential account of the lived experience of actuality. To use a metaphor, while music possesses a systematic structure, simply 'knowing' advanced musical theory will not lead an individual to instantaneously produce beautiful melodies. Instead, the individual subjectively appropriates the systematic structure of music and in the space between the ideality of this structure and the reality of their contingent and free subjectivity, something new emerges. Structure does not produce actuality, but it creates the conditions for its becoming.

2.8 Early Political Considerations

Before drawing out some of the social and political implications that emerge through this reading of *The Concept of Anxiety*, I must say something about the method I am employing in this thesis for developing my political interpretation of Kierkegaard. Rather than saving my comprehensive political reading for the end of my study, I will offer political reflections on each text discussed. In simple terms, I will be starting with a very minimal account of the political relevance of Kierkegaard's thought that will develop alongside the conceptual development of his thought presented in this study. Thus at this point, I hope to only outline what could be called a very skeletal

account of my political interpretation of Kierkegaard, one which is primarily ontological and in the coming sections this skeleton will be fleshed out in both anthropological and social terms.

While chapter four will consist of a more systematic attempt to develop a political philosophy grounded in Kierkegaard's fractured dialectical ontology, I would like to briefly note some of the political implications of this ontology that can be seen in Kierkegaard's own work. In particular, we can glean a clear picture of the implications of Kierkegaard's discussion of good and evil by drawing out the ontological implications of each of these positions, and the correlation between this ontological analysis and the practical examples given of different sorts of collective religious practice as outlined in Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity*, a text which will feature at various points throughout this thesis to show Kierkegaard's own social usage of this structure. In particular, it is worth noting the social and political implications of Kierkegaard's conception of anxiety.

We have already seen that on the ontological level anxiety serves as a reminder for the individual subject that the possibility of possibility remains behind any determinate activity as the reminder that things could always be otherwise and that there can be no such thing as a final and consummative end to the activity of spirit's process of actualization. On the level of the individual subject this means that I can never be finished with the project of becoming myself. No matter how much I progress, how many contradictions I overcome and how I reconcile my own activity with the facticity of materiality, the future will always remain infinitely ahead of me as the possibility of things being otherwise. We have already seen how this ontological situation leads the subject to experiencing anxiety about evil which can only be overcome through the movement of faith, as my own capacity for reflection will never be able to provide assurance that evil is no longer possible.

The opposite account of this was anxiety about the good in which one attempts to build an inclosing reserve around truth and a certain manner of existence with the goal of ruling out the

possibility of contingency. If the earlier account is an affirmation of freedom, anxiety about the good is an attempt to deny freedom and build a sort of consistent and totalized account of reality.

If we extrapolate this analysis to the level of the social, we can see that the same anxiety that characterizes the individual in their process of subjective becoming can also characterize a political or social institution or group in its own process of actualization. The implication would be, to put it simply, that another world is always possible, or, as Kierkegaard puts it “in possibility all things are equally possible” (*CA* 156). If there always exists a pure possibility lying outside the realm of what seems to be necessary, then there could never be a wholly necessary sort of subjectivity or society and any group would have to remain faithfully open to the continued actualization of their particular ideal. Following this it seems that Kierkegaard would not deny that we can speak in rational terms of the existence of something akin to the ‘ideal state’ or ‘ideal society’, but the risk would be in believing we could ever actualize this ideal to the point of completion. The ethical is an infinite activity of actualization and the moment at which we think ourselves privy to the consummative moment of truth is the risk of inclosing the truth and positing evil.

One of the potential risks with this reading may be that it seems as if this account turns the political and social into a game of politicized existentialism in which the fact that nothing is absolutely necessary robs any particular mode of social or political existence of any claim to value or priority. While I will flesh out this reading in subsequent chapters, at this point I can still offer some initial claims to argue against this reading. First of all, Kierkegaard’s distinction between good and evil already provides us with an idea of the types of political and social institutions that we can say are evil at the structural level. As we have seen, any individual who attempts to ground their own activity in wholly objective and immanent terms in such a way that they deny the abyss of possibility at the bottom of their own existence is anxious about the good, which Kierkegaard also calls the demonic. So following this, we could say that any social or political institution which attempted to

defend their own existence and principles in wholly rational terms which built a wall around a particular definition of truth while attempting to deny the continued possibility of possibility could be called demonic due to its anxiety about the good. For example, any political organization that wanted to claim that only a certain type of individual counted (i.e., only a certain gender, race or religion was actually privy to the truth and afforded ontological priority) would be building an inclosing reserve around a particular type of person while leaving the possibility of others outside the bounds of what they deem possible. In a sense this is equivalent to denying the abyss at the heart of reality and instead claiming to have special access to underlying structure and meaning to the extent that one can show why they 'exist' more fully than others.

The social and political implications for this should be fairly obvious, in the same way in which my project of becoming myself can never be considered as complete, or final; any social or political project which consists of the activity of a number of individuals can also never reach a point of finality in which freedom and possibility no longer call this activity into question. This can be seen through an example presented in *Practice in Christianity* in which Kierkegaard differentiates between two different forms of collective religious practice, the church triumphant and the church militant. The church triumphant is the form of religious practice in which a group believes themselves to be wholly privy to absolute theological truth and thus their knowledge of God takes on an objective form. In this church, simply being born into a 'Christian nation' qualifies one as a part of the collective, and religious knowledge is something that can be known and agreed with in a wholly objective and rational manner. Because they already possess the truth, the infinite actualization of the truth in freedom is no longer necessary and one need not develop their own subjectivity through a relation to this truth. In Kierkegaard's terms, inwardness is not present in the church triumphant as the qualification of spirit is not an issue. You are in or out based on where you are born and your agreement with a set of objective claims and thus faith is of little importance.

In opposition to this Kierkegaard uses the example of the church militant. If the previous type of church required a wholly objective relationship to its foundational truth, the militant church necessitates a subjective and inward relation to truth. This church is militant inasmuch as it is actively engaged in the process of seeking out and actualizing truth in a free act of collective becoming. Here one does not rationally agree with a set of doctrinal statements that 'are' the truth, instead one subjectively relates to truth in their own act of becoming. Because of their anxious awareness that anything is possible in the realm of possibility, the church militant would be unlikely to make pronouncements about who is in or out, but would instead remain open to the outside and hesitant to inclose their own truth.

While in the next chapter we will return to *Practice in Christianity* in a more in-depth and systematic manner, at the moment it is important that we simply note the way in which the example of these two forms of collective religious practice embody the ontological structure seen in *CA*. The church triumphant would be characterized as anxious about the good, as their primary concern is to be in possession of a static and absolute form of truth that is removed from any sense of possibility or becoming. The militant church instead represents anxiety about evil as in this church truth is considered in terms of subjective appropriation and possibility is always haunting any claim to absolute structure. Each of these forms of religious practice is grounded in a particular ontology that implies a different form of political praxis.

To put this in blunt terms, Kierkegaard's ontology leads directly a socio-political theory in which the ontological openness of reality creates a situation in which it is up to subjectivity to navigate reality in the freedom of this contingency. Because there is no such thing as the possibility of accessing some absolute metaphysical totality, or in other terms, because this dialectic never reaches a point of absolute mediation, a new state is always possible.

3: Spirit and Society

3.0 Introduction

If *The Concept of Anxiety* is the text in which Kierkegaard most clearly provides a picture of the ontological structure at the heart of his thought along with a theory of the relationship between this ontology and the structure of subjectivity, *The Sickness Unto Death* extends the ontology and development of the concept of spirit into a more fully realized anthropology. While in a certain sense these two texts can seem to speak about the same issue, we can think of *CA* as being equivalent to the construction of the foundation and frame of a building which lays out the underlying structure, while *SUD* is equivalent to the second phase of work in which this frame and foundation are filled out with wood, plaster and paint. This second work continues to build upwards and add further detail and complexity to the image of spirit and reality introduced in *CA*. In this sense then it is crucial that we hold on to the assumptions and developments of the first text when reading the later. This text assumes the ontology of the former, as well as the account of spirit that emerges in a break from innocence in that text. As we have previously seen, the ontological picture presented in *CA* allows Kierkegaard to develop a conception of spirit as freedom and in *SUD* this bare conception of spirit as freedom is further developed. If spirit could be equated to a bare ontological subjectivity in *CA*, in *SUD* we see spirit developed in a properly anthropological manner as selfhood. In this way we can say that while the former text is primarily ontological in its orientation, the latter is a psychological, or anthropological, investigation into the further development of spirit.

In this chapter I will accomplish a few different tasks. First of all, I a reading of the text will be presented which outlines the development of spirit as presented in the work, with particular focus on the way in which Kierkegaard's dialectic develops from a critique of immediacy to a theory of

reflection. Next, focus will be placed on the theological aspects of this text and following the method outlined in the previous chapter, will provide a materialist reading of this theological ontology. Finally, I will further develop the story of spirit provided in the text by moving from a discussion of the relational aspects of individual consciousness to an exemplification of how this relational structure operates at the social level. To accomplish this reference will be made to a text Kierkegaard completed alongside *SUD*, *Practice in Christianity*, and argue that this text can be seen as a social continuation of the former. By the conclusion of this chapter I will have outlined a reading of Kierkegaard that has exemplified how a consistent systematic structure operates on the levels of the ontological, the subjective and the social.

3.1 Despair

The first thing to note when discussing the structure of the self as it is presented in *SUD* is that this text assumes the conclusions of *CA*. Thus, in *SUD* spirit has already broken forth from immediacy after the encounter with the *Afgrund* of anxiety and faithfully accepted the contingency and possibility of its ontological freedom. While *CA* was concerned with the ontological grounds of subjectivity, Kierkegaard describes *SUD* as a work concerned with “genuine anthropological contemplation” (*SUD* 11). Following this, the ontological account of the subject in *CA* creates the conditions for a systematic anthropology of the self in *SUD*. Considered in terms of the journey of spirit, while *CA* provided an account of spirit’s break with immediacy, *SUD* is the story of the development of reflection by spirit, and the limits of the development of reflective consciousness. Put differently, if in *CA* the subject experiences anxiety through its break with immediacy and experience of radical freedom, in *SUD* we see how the possibility of reflection can lead the self to various forms of despair.

In the preface to the text, Kierkegaard criticizes the attempts of the Christian knowledge of his age for being overly concerned with scientific and scholarly forms of knowing at the cost of not being wholly concerned with the upbuilding of the individual. Kierkegaard points out that Christianity is related to life in a way that leaves it necessarily opposed to a scholarly distance from life. He wants Christian knowing to be concerned, and goes on to state, “concern constitutes the relation to life, to the actuality of the personality” (*SUD* 5).

Following the distinction made in the previous chapter, we need to once again remember that when Kierkegaard uses the term actuality he is using this term in distinction from its conceptual usage by the philosophers of German idealism. While for Hegel and Schelling this term signifies the consistency of a rational concept (i.e., whatever is rational is actual and vice versa), Kierkegaard takes this term to signify *existential* rather than *conceptual* actuality. While for the idealists actuality concerns logical structure, for Kierkegaard actuality signifies a relation to life and the particularity of lived existence. This is why Kierkegaard will go on to state that the anthropological tone of this text aims to focus not on “man in the abstract” (*SUD* 5) but rather on the particular existence of particular individuals; or more precisely, a concern not with a universal structure of subjectivity but instead with the anthropological features of the single individual. This brief preface is crucial for my interpretation of this text as it signifies the explicitly anthropological, and not conceptual, tone of Kierkegaard’s analysis. This follows the distinction highlighted in the previous chapter between the conceptual aims of German idealism and the existential aims of Kierkegaard’s project.

Section A of the text, ‘Despair Is the Sickness unto Death’, opens with Kierkegaard’s formula for self-consciousness, a passage notorious amongst Kierkegaard scholars for being one of the most obscure of his authorship. While some scholars have indicated that this passage is meant as a parody

of the obscure nature of Hegelian thought, I will contend against this that Kierkegaard is actively employing an explicitly Hegelian conceptual structure.¹³² The passage in question states:

[A] Human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way a human being is still not a self (*SUD* 13).

At this point in Kierkegaard's analysis of the structure of the self he defines human being as spirit and further states the spirit is precisely the self. Next he defines this self as a relation, meaning that the very structure of the self, or spirit, is relational. While the standard English translation of this text states that the self 'relates itself to itself' it is more precise to think of the self as 'relating to itself', or as being 'self relating'. The reason that the structure of the self is primarily relational is that the self is composed of a series of dialectical opposites that spirit is constantly moving between. Thus the self is made up of the tensions between: the infinite and finite, the temporal and the eternal, and freedom and necessity. At this point we can see a basically Fichtean structure to the self, as it exists as a tension between two oppositional elements, i.e. an 'I' and a 'not-I'.

But as we see in the last line, if we take this passage to be indicative of the self's structure as a whole, we necessarily fall short, as "in this way a human being is still not a self" (*SUD* 13).

¹³² For an example of a reading that takes this passage to be an ironic parody of Hegel, see Roger Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), pp. 19-20. I instead follow Jon Stewart, who argues that "Although there is virtually no discussion of the content of Hegel's philosophy in *The Sickness unto Death*, as been demonstrated, the work shows a striking use of Hegel's dialectical method." (Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel Reconsidered*, p. 591.)

Kierkegaard goes on to introduce the crucial distinction between what could be considered a broadly Fichtean anthropology and his own:

In the relation between the two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation: thus under the qualification of the psychical the relation between the psychical and the physical is a relation. If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self (*SUD* 13).

At this point Kierkegaard introduces a third element into the structure of the self and this third element is precisely spirit as the positive third which both relates to the two previously discussed opposed elements while also relating to itself. This positive third is distinct from a negative relation as in this case spirit relates negatively to both the infinite and the finite and not positively to itself. It knows that it is an oscillation between these two opposed elements, but it does not want to be just one or the other and thus it is constantly attempting to get away from being just finite or just infinite. Thus, the negative relation is spirit attempting to differentiate itself from any category of absolute determinacy, i.e., spirit does not want to be just one or the other of its two opposed elements. Spirit is thus the *activity* of constantly negating its being wholly associated with one of these two opposed elements. The positive third, which is the self, breaks from this constant oscillation of negatively relating to two opposed elements by also relating to itself and this level of self relation is what opens up spirit to the process of reflection and thus truly entering the journey of becoming a self.

After explaining that the structure of the self contains two opposed elements dialectically related to by spirit as the third that relates to each of these elements while also relating to itself,

Kierkegaard introduces an idea that further differentiates his own approach to the self from the thought of Fichte and the idealist tradition. Kierkegaard states:

Such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established itself or have been established by another (*SUD* 13).

Kierkegaard is here arguing that this theory of the self can either be self-positing in its orientation, i.e. serve as its own grounds or foundation, or instead can have been established by something existing wholly outside the structure of the self. In the terms of German idealism we can see Kierkegaard here following Schelling in his break from his own system of absolute idealism, which for the large part follows the Fichtean structure of self-consciousness, and the development of his un-grounded theory of freedom that emerges in *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. Kierkegaard's next move in the first page of section A opens up the possibility for despair (which signifies the opening of reflection) which will guide the analysis provided in the rest of the text. Kierkegaard adds that:

If the relation that relates itself to itself has been established by another, then the relation is indeed the third, but this relation, the third, is yet again a relation and relates itself to that which established the entire relation (*SUD* 13).

This adds another level of relationality to the structure Kierkegaard has already introduced. We have already seen that spirit is the relation contained within the self between two opposed elements. This addition adds another level of relationality between the self and the power that established the self. So while the self contains an internal relation between two opposing poles (i.e.,

possibility/necessity), spirit also functions as a relating between the self and the power that established the self. So in true idealist fashion, Kierkegaard identifies this fundamentally relational structure of the self and extrapolates this structure to a higher level. We will later see how this structure is repeated in the context of socio-politically relations. Kierkegaard sums up the structure outlined in the opening of part A by stating:

The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another (*SUD* 13-14).

This dual nature of the self, that it is both dialectically relational and established by another, is what allows Kierkegaard to argue that there are thus two forms of despair experienced by the self. The first form of despair is described as “not to will to be oneself”, the second is “in despair not to will to be oneself” (*SUD* 14). While he outlines these two distinct forms of despair, he is quick to note that all forms of despair can be traced back to the second form of despair, as the root of despair is a failure to either a) recognize or b) accept that one’s self is not self-positing but has been established by another. Any attempt to deny or evade this reality leads to despair. One of the fundamental moves of this text is thus to analyze the various forms of despair and outline the cure for the problem of despair, which we will soon see is faith. Kierkegaard goes on to describe the cure for despair as such:

The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it (*SUD* 14).

Thus when the self is both a) willing to be itself and b) affirming itself while also willingly acknowledging the fact that it has not posited itself and is thus grounded in something outside itself, it is outside of despair. To reiterate, despair can be seen as the self's infinitely failing process of trying to be wholly autonomous in itself, and along with this, the process of being caught in an infinite series of reflection.

In the story Kierkegaard is telling about the development of spirit, despair serves as both an excellence and a defect (*SUD* 14). This is because while despair can lead to an inability to properly will to be oneself along with a refusal to recognize that one is not wholly autonomous, it also opens up the space for reflection, which is a positive development of spirit on its journey forward from immediacy and anxiety. According to Kierkegaard:

The possibility of this sickness is man's superiority over the animal [...] for it indicates infinite erectness or sublimity, that he is spirit (*SUD* 15).

While the possibility of this sickness is man's superiority over purely animal existence, "to be aware of this sickness is the Christian's superiority over the natural man" (*SUD* 15). For Kierkegaard, "to be able to despair is an infinite advantage" precisely because it signifies a being able, a capacity for reflection and possibility. He goes to state that "not being able to be in despair must signify the destroyed possibility of being able to be in despair" (*SUD* 15), thus the lack of a capacity for despair signifies the lack of capacity for reflection and possibility in general. So while being in despair is in fact a defect of spirit, it continuously signifies the excellence of spirit in its reflective capacity. Or in other words, better to be in a failed form of reflection that signifies the qualification of spirit than to not be spirit at all.

So for the self to not be in despair, it must at every moment destroy possibility. This destruction of possibility simply signifies the risk of spirit being caught up in reflecting on an infinity of possibilities, a form of despair Kierkegaard will go on to explain, but for the time being it is worth noting that this destruction relates to actuality in that actuality itself is consummated, not annihilated, possibility. Thus, the point here is not that spirit simply annihilates possibility, but that spirit moves from determinate reflection on one possibility to the actualization of that possibility, which serves as its consummation.

Section B of the first book of the text, 'The Universality of the Sickness (Despair)', goes on to argue that despair is a fundamental condition of humanity and a necessary aspect of the self. In a move which shows a clear point of continuity between this text and the previously discussed *Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard argues that anxiety and despair are both fundamental to being human. Anxiety represents the fundamental disharmony at the heart of subjectivity and the inability of the self to be its own foundation. While anxiety remains an ontological category used to describe the foundational state of universal human subjectivity, despair (which is a category of the self) is a qualification of human spirit. While anxiety remains a category signifying the failure of immediacy, despair is a category of reflection.

Kierkegaard goes on to explain this by differentiating physical from psychological health. Physical health is an immediate category that leads to a thinking of the human as a clear synthesis of the physical and psychological, when considered in terms of spirit (the psychological) there can be no such thing as immediate health. Referring back his analysis from *CA*, Kierkegaard notes, "all immediacy is anxiety and thus, quite consistently, is most anxious about nothing" (*SUD* 25). This immediacy is made anxious when made aware of the indefinite nature of its own ontological grounds. Reflection, or despair, follows a similar structure and is never so much itself with it is precisely nothing, or put differently, becomes nothing through infinite reflection. The transition from anxiety to despair has

to do with the progression of the dialectical nature of spirit. While anxiety is the relation between the subject and its grounds, in despair the subject takes on a dialectical structure and thus there no longer exists a simple contradiction between the subject and its grounds, but this subject contains a contradiction within itself. Put differently, anxiety is the relation between something and nothing, while despair involves the contradictions of the self's split nature (infinite/finite) relating to both possibility and necessity. As we will soon see, despair is at its most basic a lack of awareness that one is dialectically constituted as spirit. As Kierkegaard states:

What wretchedness that they are lumped together and deceived instead of being split apart so that each individual may gain the highest, the only thing worth living for and enough to live in for an eternity (*SUD* 27).

Despair is thus the necessary splitting apart of both abstract humanity into the single individual and a further splitting apart of the individual's own consciousness. This split, or fracture, is the sign of man's true nature as spirit. While Kierkegaard notes this qualification of man as spirit is thought to be rare, it is in fact the most universal trait of humanity. Most simply fail to realize they are spirit in this sense.

In section C (the forms of this sickness) Kierkegaard further outlines the structure of the self in its relations to the twin poles of infinitude/finitude and possibility/necessity. He states that the self is composed of two parts: infinitude and finitude, and that the synthesis between infinitude and finitude is a relation, and further, this relation, which is the self, can be called *freedom*. This relational structure then takes on another aspect when Kierkegaard says, "freedom is the dialectical aspect of the categories of possibility and necessity" (*SUD* 29). So the self (freedom) is the relational synthesis

of infinitude and finitude and this self is then further dialectically related to the categories of possibility and necessity.

This structure is the structure of consciousness (which is awareness of self by the self) for Kierkegaard, which is crucial as his aim is to consider despair entirely within the category of consciousness. This relates back to the distinction in section B between despair that is conscious of itself and despair that is not conscious of itself as being in despair.

He goes on to highlight the importance of consciousness for properly considering despair by connecting the category of consciousness with the categories of both self and will, stating:

The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness the more will; the more will, the more self (*SUD* 29).

Thus for Kierkegaard, the self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude, or more precisely, consciousness is the self's awareness that it is a synthesis (or, is composed) of infinitude and finitude. In this active relation between the poles of infinitude and finitude, it is thus the task of the self to more fully become itself by relating both to its own internal synthesis of infinitude and finitude, as well as relating itself to the poles of possibility and necessity. Along with this, and most importantly, the self can only in the final instance become itself through its relationship to God, as that which has established the whole relation. While his conception of faith is further elaborated in the second half of the book, for the time being we can simply note that relating to God primarily signifies the acknowledgement that one's self has an origin that lies outside its own circle of reflective consciousness, an origin related to the *Afgrund* of absolute freedom discussed in the previous chapter.

Kierkegaard thinks that becoming a self is equivalent to becoming concrete and that this becoming concrete consists of fighting the temptation to become either wholly finite or infinite; rather, becoming concrete consists of existing within the very tension of this synthesis. Kierkegaard describes this process, of becoming concrete, as such:

The process of becoming must be an infinite moving away from itself in the infinitizing of the self, and an infinite coming back to itself in the finitizing process (*SUD* 30).

Thus, if the self is to properly become itself it must let itself move away from itself in the act of infinite reflection, which is reflection about pure possibility, but only to then return back to its finite, or necessary aspect to refill the necessary with the possible, or, the finite with the infinite. It is important to note that this is not a one-time process and more importantly, we must note that this process of becoming *is* the self. The self, as spirit, is precisely this activity of movement between the infinite and the finite, the possible and the necessary. As Kierkegaard puts it, “every moment the self exists, it is in a process of becoming” (*SUD* 30). Inasmuch as the self does not become itself in the fashion outlined above, it is not itself, and is thus in despair.

With this structure of the activity of the self now adequately outlined, Kierkegaard goes on to describe the two primary types of despair which both emerge as the product of two different forms of mis-relation in the structure of the self.

The first form of despair is the one that emerges when spirit ventures off into the realm of infinitude and fails to come back and touch the ground of finitude. In this sense, the despair of infinitude can only be defined directly by reflecting on its opposed concept: finitude (*SUD* 30). In this case of despair, infinitude represents “the fantastic, the unlimited” (*SUD* 30). In this form of

despair spirit becomes paralyzed through reflecting on the fantastic possibilities contained in the infinite.

Kierkegaard uses this form of despair to introduce another important concept for his theory of consciousness: the imagination. He brings up this concept through its relation to the fantastic, one of the tendencies of infinitude's despair and goes on to state that the imagination is further related to "feeling, knowing, and willing" (*SUD* 30). This is important as so long as the imagination is a tendency of the self and is also related to feeling, knowing and willing, then there can also be imaginary feeling, knowing and willing.

He goes on to describe the imagination as infinitizing reflection, which simply means that imagination spurs reflection on an infinite trajectory with no finite limit. The self who is caught up in imagination is the self that is trapped in an endless cycle, or circle, of reflection. Imagination in general is not an inherently negative concept for Kierkegaard as "the self is reflection, and the imagination is reflection, is the rendition of the self as the self's possibility." (*SUD* 31) Imagination is negative, however, when through imagining the fantastic in an infinite manner, the self is led infinitely away from itself to the point that it is prevented from making a return to itself. Rather than the self relating to its two poles (infinitude-finitude) in a process of becoming, the self whose imagination is caught in fantastic reflection merely moves in one direction, with no return to itself.

Kierkegaard goes on to describe the way in which this form of despair affects feeling, knowing and willing. When feeling becomes fantastic, the self turns into an "abstract sentimentality" (*SUD* 31) that combines sentimentality with some abstract fate. Rather than becoming herself more and more, this person loses herself more and more (*SUD* 31).

With knowing, it is normally the case that an increase of knowledge corresponds to an increase in self-knowledge (*SUD* 31); thus the more the self knows, the more the self knows itself. But when

knowledge fails to make this return to itself and become self-knowledge, this fantastic form of imaginary knowledge is merely abstract and inhuman.

Finally, in terms of willing, when it becomes fantastic there is no longer an even proportion between abstract and concrete willing and the self once again loses itself through a pure willing of the fantastic, or abstract, with no reference to the concrete. In all three of these examples these aspects of the self risk becoming wholly fantastic, or infinite, rather than a dynamic relation between the infinite and the finite. When the self becomes swept away in this manner it loses its dialectical nature and ends up existing purely in the fantasy of abstract and infinite possibility with no reference to the concrete or the actual. It is not difficult to see why this form of despair would have a dramatically a-social and a-political effect on the self and its existence.

The most unsettling aspect of this form of despair, however, is that, as Kierkegaard points out, this retreat into the fantastic does not preclude the possibility that one go on living a fairly normal life. As Kierkegaard sees it, this person can still, “marry, have children, be honored and esteemed” (*SUD* 32) even though in fact he or she lacks a self. Kierkegaard believes this loss of self does “not create much of a stir” precisely because a self is “the most dangerous thing of all for a person to show signs of having” (*SUD* 32). This loss of self is so dangerous precisely because it so easily goes unnoticed.

The opposite pole of the fantastic despair of infinitude is finitude’s despair that is to lack infinitude, which Kierkegaard refers to as “despairing reductionism” (*SUD* 33). In this type of despair the self avoids infinitude by staying completely within the bounds of the finite. When one is completely finitized in this manner, Kierkegaard states that man runs the risk of “becoming a number instead of a self” (*SUD* 33). When one loses the infinite aspect of the dialectical structure of their self, they cease to exist in a properly spiritual sense and thus out of this fear of becoming

oneself they avoid the essential contingency which is characteristic of humanity and the relation between the human and reality.

Rather than the self who loses itself by a reckless plunge into the infinite, in this form of despair one is “tricked out of itself” (*SUD* 33) by others, or the crowd. In this instance one finds it easier to become lost in the crowd or some sort of abstract collective rather than to truly believe in and thus become, oneself. Kierkegaard describes the one who avoids an essential encounter with their own self through absorption in the crowd as “a copy, a number, a mass man” (*SUD* 34).

Once again the most surprising aspect of this despair is that one can go on living a normal and even successful life. Kierkegaard says that this man will often have great success in business and social life. He goes on to describe this form of despair as the “secular mentality”, in which men “use their capacities, amass money, carry on secular enterprises [...] but themselves they are not; spiritually speaking they have no self” (*SUD* 35). Thus when one lacks infinitude, they become totally absorbed in finite and spiritless matters. There is nothing dialectical and thus spiritual, about this despair.

After defining despair in terms of the poles of infinitude and finitude, Kierkegaard deepens his analysis of despair by defining it in terms of possibility and necessity. He states that:

Possibility and necessity are equally essential to becoming (and the self has the task of becoming itself in freedom) (*SUD* 35).

Following this, he first outlines possibility’s despair, which is to lack necessity. This type of despair runs more or less parallel to the despair that lacks finitude, but is more developed in an even deeper sense. To help explain this despair Kierkegaard offers an updated description of the structure of the self in these terms:

Insofar as it is itself, it is the necessary, and insofar as it has the task of becoming itself, it is a possibility (*SUD* 35).

The risk inherent in this form of despair is that the self runs wildly away from itself in possibility to the extent that it loses any necessity to which it might return. Kierkegaard describes this self as a purely ‘abstract possibility’ which:

Flounders in possibility until exhausted but neither moves from the place where it is nor arrives anywhere, for necessity is literally that place; to become oneself is literally a movement in that place (*SUD* 36).

So in this case possibility seems greater and greater to the self, as an infinity of possibilities lie before her at every moment and none of these possibilities ever become actual. Kierkegaard goes on, “eventually everything seems possible, but this is exactly the point at which the abyss swallows up the self” (*SUD* 36). In this process of the self becoming pure possibility the time between the appearance of one possibility and another grows so brief that eventually the self becomes a mirage. There is no longer time to even consider the actualization of these possibilities. This form of life now lacks all actuality, and in light of this the “individual has become unreal” (*SUD* 36). This lack of actuality, however, is in Kierkegaard’s terms a lack of necessity. He is careful to distinguish his position from that of the Hegelians of his day on this point by noting that:

The philosophers are mistaken when they explain necessity as a unity of possibility and actuality- no, actuality is the unity of possibility and necessity (*SUD* 36).

This lack of necessity experienced by the one caught up in the unreal life of pure possibility is thus the lack of submission to the necessity contained in life. Because the self has a finite and necessary aspect, the attempt to become pure possibility requires an ignorance of this necessity. Kierkegaard says that this self has thus ‘fantastically reflected itself in possibility’ to the point that when looking into a mirror one does not necessarily recognize themselves. In practical terms the one whom despairs in this way would be so concerned with the infinite possibility of their desires and hopes that they would be paralyzed from taking these desires and hopes to bear on necessity and subsequently from ever making these possibilities actual. This could look like the young graduate with so many options for her future that she spends her days sketching out elaborate life plans while failing to ever put on her shoes and go out into the world to make any of these possibilities actual. On the other hand, this could also be the young man so anxious about losing his beloved that instead of spending time actually experiencing this person he loves so deeply, he retreats further into his own self through anxiously relating to the possibility that this love could at any moment collapse.

When Kierkegaard moves on to a discussion of the opposite of possibility’s despair, which is necessity’s despair, he says that:

The necessary is like pure consonants, but to express this there must be possibility. If this is lacking, if a human experience is brought to the point where it lacks possibility, then it is in despair and is in despair every moment it lacks possibility (*SUD* 37).

In simple terms, if the one lost in the infinite abyss of possibility is in despair because the multitude of possibility moves them so far from anything necessary that spirit never becomes actual, then the despair of necessity takes away all possibility and thus one’s ability to believe in anything not finite or

necessary. If the one suffering from the despair of possibility never ventures out into the world because there are too many things to do, the one suffering from the despair of necessity stays home because there is nothing to do. It is similar to the difference between a fantastic transcendence in which what is truly the most real is infinitely ‘out-there’ and a stable immanence in which all that exists and might ever exist is contained in one stable totality.

After introducing this form of despair Kierkegaard introduces an idea that Slavoj Žižek has referred to as Kierkegaard’s key ontological formula,¹³³ this is the idea that “what is decisive is that with God everything is possible” (*SUD* 38).

This is the crucial ground upon which faith, which will soon be outlined as the corrective to despair, stands. The despair of necessity is thus firmly rooted to the understanding, and according to secular understanding there is no possibility other than what is necessary, or finite. For the one trapped in this form of despair, possibility is thus the only chance of salvation (*SUD* 38). This possibility is connected to breaking with the understanding through a movement of faith in which one becomes a believer by acknowledging, “that for God everything is possible” (*SUD* 39). Even if one makes the decision of faith in an attempt to break the bounds of finite necessity, the human understanding will still maintain the tension that “his collapse is all together certain” (*SUD* 39); this tension is what Kierkegaard describes as the dialectic of believing. He goes on to state that “the believer sees and understands his downfall, humanly speaking, but he believes. For this reason he does not collapse” (*SUD* 39). Thus even when the world seems to pose absolute obstacles to the development of the self, she is able to rest in the openness of the possibility of God and move forward. Here one could rightly think of the famous closing lines from Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnameable*:

“*You must go on. I can’t go on. I’ll go on.*”

¹³³ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 79.

We could think of the ‘you must go on’ as the imperative to become oneself. ‘I can’t go on’ would be the response to this imperative by the one caught in the despair of necessity, and finally, ‘I’ll go on’ would represent the self resting in the fact that while necessity may deem something impossible, with God everything is possible, so the self existing in faith can continue to develop.

This further development of the self in relation to the movement of faith and faith’s overcoming of the fatal determinism of necessity leads Kierkegaard to stating, “personhood is a synthesis of possibility and necessity” (*SUD* 40). Existing as just one or the other leads to inevitable despair. For the fatalist, another name for the one caught in necessity’s despair, God thus becomes necessity. Kierkegaard corrects this by restating his key religious formula as:

Since everything is possible for God, then God is this - that everything is possible (*SUD* 40).

It is interesting to note that rather than offering any sort of theological content to the concept of God, Kierkegaard gives it only the ontological-existential content of signifying pure possibility. This distinction will be highlighted later in the present chapter.

Kierkegaard goes on to relate his formula (God *is* Possibility) to the development of the self as spirit by stating that:

Only he whose being has been so shaken that he has become spirit by understanding that everything is possible, only he has anything to do with God (*SUD* 40).

Thus the encounter with the possibility of God serves the purpose of de-stabilizing the self by making her aware that the seeming stability of necessity is fractured with possibility. This is what

enables spirit to properly become itself. The being of God as possibility is thus the ontological condition for the free development of spirit (or, freedom) in becoming itself.

Kierkegaard contrasts the believer with what he calls the philistine-bourgeois mentality. He describes this mentality as essentially lacking possibility and as fundamentally spiritless. Rather than existing in the dialectical tension between necessity and possibility:

The philistine-bourgeois mentality lacks every qualification of spirit and is completely wrapped up in probability (*SUD* 41).

Thus rather than spirit existing in the possibility that is signified by God, the philistine-bourgeois considers only what is probable in the finite-necessary nature of a situation. Novelty in any true sense would be impossible for the philistine-bourgeois, as only what is contained in the situation could be probabilistically possible. As Kierkegaard goes on to state, “he lives within a certain trivial compendium of experiences as to how things go” (*SUD* 41).

Kierkegaard states that this person is left unaware of both their self and God and only the possibility of imagination can tear him out of the calculated nature of his probabilistic experience and teach him how to fear and hope. This happens by “rendering possible that which surpasses the sufficient amount of any experience” (*SUD* 41). So without the capacity for imagination, the philistine-bourgeois mentality does not allow one to think anything beyond the limits of possible experience. He goes on to argue that the philistine-bourgeois mentality thinks, “that it has tricked this prodigious elasticity into the trap or madhouse of probability” (*SUD* 41), or in other words has taken the previously mentioned “essential contingency” (*SUD* 33) of human existence and attempted to reduce it to a system of necessity and probability.

Thus far we have seen Kierkegaard progress from analyzing despair in terms of infinitude-finitude and possibility-necessity, now we will look at his most thorough analysis of despair when he attempts to define it by consciousness. This analysis will prove to be crucial for our purposes as Kierkegaard explicitly deals with the development of spirit and its journey through despair in terms of immediacy and reflection. The first point which needs to be made regarding the relation between despair and consciousness is that, “the greater the degree of consciousness, the more intensive the despair” (*SUD* 42).

When considering despair in terms of consciousness Kierkegaard breaks despair down into even more precise categories than he has with infinitude-finitude and possibility-necessity. The first type of despair in this categorization is despair that is ignorant of being in despair and ignorant of having a (eternal) self. In this form of despair the human is “completely dominated by the sensate and the sensate-physical” (*SUD* 43). This individual waves goodbye to spirit, and subsequently misses out on being the absolute that a human can be. As Kierkegaard theorizes it, every human being is spirit inasmuch as they are a synthesis of the psychical and the physical and by leaving out the psychical element there is no contradiction or opposition and thus no relational structure. Kierkegaard compares the person suffering from this form of despair to someone who builds a three-story house, with each story signifying a higher level of social distinction and then choosing to live in the basement. In this example the basement represents pure sensate existence, while the higher levels represent the progression of spirit’s self-becoming.

Kierkegaard equates this form of despair with the sort of thinker who erects a huge system to explain the whole of existence and history, but fails to consider his own place in this grand system. The allusion here is once again to the Danish Hegelians who used Hegel’s logical categories to provide a comprehensive account of religion and existence. The thinker erects a huge home, but

lives in the doghouse out back rather than occupying a place in the home he worked so hard to construct as she forgot to build a room for herself.

Kierkegaard also relates the ignorance of being in despair with the ignorance of being in anxiety discussed in the previous chapter. This anxiety, which is spiritlessness, is recognized by its spiritless sense of security, in a manner akin to the one who would rather live in the basement of the purely sensate rather than ascend the stairs of spirit.

For Kierkegaard, this individual is separated from the one who is conscious of being in despair by being “a negativity further away from the truth” (*SUD* 44). This journey to the truth of spirit is thus a series of overcoming various negativities, as Kierkegaard says “to reach the truth, one must go through every negativity” (*SUD* 44). This form of despair is merely the most basic and because of this, it is the most common form of despair in the world (*SUD* 45).

This form of despair, which is a lack of awareness of being spirit, leads the individual to seek their identity through merging with “some abstract universality”, such as a nation or state (*SUD* 46). By remaining ignorant of both their fundamental nature (spirit) and the source of this nature (God), the self continues to try and find these things in something wholly external to its self and its nature.

The next development of despair is the consciousness of being in despair and subsequently in despair not willing to be oneself, or, in despair willing to be oneself. While this represents a movement towards spirit, this is a more intensive form of despair than the form previously discussed as it is more conscious of being in despair, and responds to this awareness with even more despairing attempts to get out of despair. Kierkegaard outlines these despairing attempts to get out of despair through contrasting them to faith, the only actual solution to despair, the formula of which is:

In relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it (*SUD* 49).

Thus the progression of forms of despair outlined in this analysis represents a variety of attempts to get out of despair which all fall short of the formula of faith.

He begins by outlining the transition from pure immediacy to reflection in regards to despair. This process begins when one existing in pure immediacy (which is spiritless) experiences some sort of suffering that is wholly external, “in no way does it come from within as an act” (*SUD* 51). This individual is psychically qualified, but in a childlike fashion. Its dialectic is not one of infinitude-finitude or possibility-necessity but rather good luck-bad luck (*SUD* 51). Something then happens to this immediate self that comes from outside and leads to despair, but this despair is more like a basic form of unhappiness than it is a truly dialectical despair. As Kierkegaard puts it, each excess that requires reflection leads the man of immediacy into this form of despair, as a realization of the limits of immediacy.

This sort of despair is the lowest form of despairingly not willing to be oneself as these external occasions that call for reflection call for an awareness that he is a self, as spirit, with the capacity for reflection. Thus his despair is a refusal to become a self, or an attempt to be someone else (*SUD* 53). The man of immediacy thus remains devoid of self-knowledge and identifies himself only by externalities, such as “the clothes he wears” (*SUD* 53). To put it simply, the man of immediacy thinks he can cure despair through changing his clothes, or self-identifying with a new form of externality. Kierkegaard refers to this as a comic form of despair (*SUD* 53).

The next step of this progression from immediacy to reflection takes place when immediacy is assumed to have some reflection (*SUD* 54). This occurs when enough reflection is present to enable the man of immediacy to recognize himself as essentially different or separated from the externalities

he previously sought to identify with. This opens up the space for self-activity and an awareness of responsibility for one's self (*SUD* 54). Now that the man of immediacy has enough reflection to recognize the separation of his own self from externality, he then realizes that obstacles also exist within the structure of his own self. The necessary aspect of the self restricts the possible aspect and "this difficulty, whatever it is, makes him recoil" (*SUD* 54). This emergence of the contradiction (or, tension) within the very structure of the self signifies the first signs of the potential for a full break with immediacy, but this awareness itself does not lead to this break.

This reflection, which has made man aware that he is not simply the externalities he has previously identified with, makes him further aware that "there is much he can lose without losing the self" (*SUD* 55). This then provides him with a dim idea that there may even be something eternal contained within himself. In spite of this, he still avoids taking full responsibility for himself, and thus avoids a full break with immediacy. Thus, he still despairs not to will to be oneself. He has stepped past willing to be someone else, but still remains in a higher form of despair. He became a self up until a point, but refused to venture any further. At this point we could say that this despair, immediacy with a quantitative reflection, is still despair over the earthly, which is the most common form of despair. Most people will remain here and never live within the qualification of spirit. This only happens at the point at which they are compelled to turn inward which happens through an experience of the moment, or instant. To reckon with this I will now move to a more critical discussion of Kierkegaard's conception of faith and paradox and its place in the curing of despair.

3.2 Faith and Paradox

While *SUD* is without a doubt one of Kierkegaard's most blatantly philosophical and systematic works in tone as well style, it is worth using an example from one of his most literary

works, *Repetition*, to highlight the transition that takes place between Part I and Part II of *SUD*. In *Repetition* we see a young man transitioning from attempting to overcome despair in the methods outlined in Part I of *Sickness*, which inevitably lead to failure, to overcoming this despair through an encounter with something external which leads to faith. After this encounter the young man says, “I am myself again [...] I am unified again” (*FTR* 220).

This character goes on to state, “when the idea calls, I abandon everything, or, more correctly, I have nothing to abandon” (*FTR* 221). This young man goes from attempting to understand his despair in totally logical (or immanent) terms and through encountering something which signifies a transcendence outside of his circle of logical reflection, lets himself embrace the contingency at the heart of being. After this experience he says:

Three cheers for the dance in the vortex of the infinite [...] three cheers for the cresting waves that fling me above the stars! (*FTR* 222)

This embracing of contingency, of faith, is what Kierkegaard offers to the solution of despair that was outlined in detail in Book 1.

At this point (the conclusion of part I) Kierkegaard has worked through the dialectics of despair in relation to consciousness and outlined the various attempts that consciousness makes to break out of despair. While it seems that Kierkegaard has attempted to provide an account of how despair can be overcome, the endeavor ends in failure. It would not be absurd to say that in Part I of *SUD*, Kierkegaard is in fact emphasizing the limits of a Fichtean account of consciousness, and in particular the account offered by Fichte during his Jena Period (exemplified in the 1794 *Science of Knowledge*). This account, as outlined in chapter one of this work, considers consciousness as internal to itself, consisting of the dialectical tension between an I and a not-I; and while this version of consciousness can be considered properly self-relating in the sense Kierkegaard outlines in the

opening pages of *SUD*, it fails the test of resting transparently in the power which posited it. Thus no matter how fully developed this version of consciousness is, it will always remain trapped in a cycle of despair as long as its activity and grounding are considered wholly immanent to its own activity.

With this in mind, we can see that if Part I of this book consists of an exercise in the inevitable failure of a Fichtean model of consciousness, Part II consist of Kierkegaard introducing the concept capable of accounting for consciousness' way out of the despair of infinite reflection, which is faith. To arrive at this existential solution to the problem of despair, Kierkegaard first re-articulates the key conceptual terms of Part I in explicitly theological terms, and thus despair is now more precisely defined as sin (*SUD* 77). In relation to the analysis presented thus far, sin does not want to recognize that one is always already posited by something existing outside itself, which is God. Following this, despair/sin can be considered as not willing to be oneself before God. Thus the faithful way out of despair involves not only a positive willing to be oneself, but the subsequent movement of willing to be oneself before God in faith. Following this, faith characterizes the self that rests transparently in God. Sin, which Kierkegaard refers to as a qualification of spirit, is the condition of spirit that leads to despair and faith is the way for spirit to get out of the deadlock of despair caused by sin.

While terms such as sin and faith surely carry with them weighty theological connotations, I would like to continue to follow the strategy outlined in the previous chapter and instead consider the philosophical and ontological significance of these concepts. Sin in this text carries with it the same ontological significance as it did in *CA*, namely as signifying a fundamental split, or inconsistency, between the self and it-self (or, the I and the not-I). This position, sin, could thus stand for the position of Jena-era Fichte. Faith, on the other hand, signifies the development of spirit past the wholly negative self-relation of sin. Rather than faith signifying a recuperative

moment, or synthesis, by which the two poles of consciousness (possibility/necessity, infinitude/finitude) are united in a third term without any excess or remainder, faith instead signifies the affirmation of this essential gap (or contradiction) that characterizes spirit. Faith is not a fixing of the split articulated by sin, but is rather the affirmation of this split as something fundamental. Faith does not fix, but rather affirms, the fracture at the heart of existence.

So if sin can be seen as representing a certain version of Fichte's theory of consciousness in which self-relation is primarily the contradiction of an I and a not-I, then faith can be considered as operating in a manner similar to the ontology articulated in Schelling's *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, which was explicated in the previous chapters. This means that faith is precisely the affirmation of the *Afgrund* of being, i.e., faith in God does not equate to an absolute knowing grounded in an absolute being or substance; as Kierkegaard notes, "God is not some externality, like a policeman" (*SUD* 80). But rather, faith is that spirit is grounded in God as the un-pre-thinkable grounds of possibility and contingency which forever elides any sort of dialectical recuperation or a moment of finality.

Thus at the level of the purely ontological, the movement that takes place from *CA* through *SUD* consists of a critique of any immediate account of the grounds of consciousness and spirit in favor of an *Afgrund* which utilizes a Schelling-inspired ontology to argue that spirit itself is the activity of freedom. At the level of reflection this means that God signifies the un-pre-thinkable thing that haunts any attempt for reflection to maintain any sort of logical totality, as there remains something wholly outside the recuperative activity of reflection.

Moving forward in his religious solution to the problem of despair, Kierkegaard introduces another of his oft-used concepts: paradox. Paradox is crucial as it distinguishes Kierkegaard's position from a more typically dialectical account of consciousness in which one stage is sublated in

the next; i.e. faith is not a result that is immanent to the self-development of consciousness. On a larger scale we can see this distinction (between paradox and dialectic) in Kierkegaard's theory of the stages: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. As Slavoj Žižek has noted this triad of stages does not involve, on the one hand, a choice between three equally rational life views, or on the other, a system in which each stage is the dialectical consequence of the other. According to Žižek:

[...] The religious is by no means the mediating 'synthesis' of the two [the aesthetic and the ethical], but, on the contrary, the radical assertion of the parallax gap (the 'paradox', the lack of common measure, the insurmountable abyss between the Finite and the Infinite). That is to say: what makes the Aesthetic or the Ethical problematic is not their respective positive characteristics, but their very formal nature: the fact that, in both cases, the subject wants to live a consistent mode of existence, and thus disavows the radical antagonism of the human situation.¹³⁴

Thus it is not the case that the religious is the synthetic third moment that unites the contradiction between the aesthetic and the ethical. Rather, while there exists a dialectical moment in the transition from the aesthetic to the ethical, there is no transition from the ethical to the religious, the relation of these two stages is not dialectical but paradoxical and thus the subjective condition of faith is necessary to venture from the ethical into the religious, this is what Kierkegaard refers to as the leap.¹³⁵ In terms of the development of consciousness, paradox allows Kierkegaard to point out

¹³⁴ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 105.

¹³⁵ It is interesting to note that while often seen as a move away from a Hegelian system, Kierkegaard actually gleans this concept of 'the leap' from Hegel's *Science of Logic*.

the limits of the logic of reflection. The ontological condition of paradox is a corollary to the subjective moment of decision. Kierkegaard says that the modern mind, which he associates with reflection, holds that “to think is to be” (*SUD* 93). Thus reflective thought is constitutive of being, or existence. Understanding the logical conditions of thought is thus equivalent with living, or existing, in the world. Kierkegaard opposes this modern mindset with the world of actuality, a concept outlined in the previous chapter. According to Kierkegaard, “in the world of Actuality, there is a transition from understanding to doing” (*SUD* 93-94).

The crucial point here is, simply stated, that thought itself does not create action. Put differently, reflecting on reality in-itself has no effect whatsoever on actually existing reality. Kierkegaard does not primarily think of the human as a purely reflective being, but as spirit, and “in the life of spirit there is no standing still” (*SUD* 94). Kierkegaard associates the equation between thought and existence with the modern mind, and a largely Cartesian model of subjectivity in which thought implies existence. Kierkegaard instead associates the Greek mind with the connection between understanding and doing and thus his goal here is in one sense to re-problematize the modern equation of thought with existence. This is why for spirit there is no standing still, as for spirit “everything is actuation”, or put differently, the act of spirit is the constant actualization of ideality (*SUD* 94).

The point here is to highlight the limits of reflection as it pertains to action and actuality, and this is primarily accomplished by arguing that decision serves as the moment at which human consciousness can break out of the circle of logical reflection and create the conditions for action. Thus, rather than ideality being equivalent to actuality, it is the work of the subject to will the ideal in the actual. This point is crucial as this helps us avoid a crass reading in which Kierkegaard’s ‘religious existentialism’ is put in absolute opposition to the systematicity of German idealism. The reason that

paradox is so crucial to this break from reflection is that paradox, as opposed to dialectical transition, forces a choice, as one can no longer follow the logical unfolding of consciousness (or reality), but must make a determinate decision. While Kierkegaard prefers Christ as the example of paradox par excellence (as Christ is both divine and human, transcendence and immanence) we could just as well use the structure of romantic love as the example of a paradox. When one falls in love, she is faced with a decision that no system of logic can help her make. They are well aware that billions of potential partners exist on this planet, and that most love-relationships end in heartbreak and disaster anyways and there is no guarantee that they will not also end up with a broken heart. Thus is the paradox of love, ‘this likely will not work, but I simply cannot do otherwise.’ Faith is then the decisive action by which two lovers make a pledge to each other that is beyond the bounds of any logical certainty or epistemological proof. This paradox marks the disruptive split between ideality (logic) and actuality (existence). It is crucial to note that this paradoxical split between logic and existence is not some existential appropriation of Kant’s ontology in which subjective freedom is the product of our absolute inability to access absolute reality as it ‘really is’ in-itself. Kierkegaard is here not post-Kantian but post-Hegelian in his orientation, as this paradoxical gap does not imply a gap or deficiency in the subject’s ability to know the underlying purpose or structure of reality (i.e., an epistemological limit) but rather this gap is the product of a radical freedom which is ontological and not epistemological in nature (i.e. the abyssal grounds of freedom).

The implications of failing to grasp Kierkegaard’s fundamentally post-Hegelian (or idealist) orientation in this context has recently led to an extremely provocative reading in which Lee Braver labels Kierkegaard’s position as a ‘transgressive realism’ which occupies a crucial place between the Hegelian and Heideggerian strands of recent European philosophy.¹³⁶ In Braver’s reading, which is a

¹³⁶ Lee Braver, ‘A Brief History of Continental Realism’, *Continental Philosophy Review*, 45 (2): p. 261-189. Accessed online.

key aspect of his larger project of tracing the history of what he calls continental realism,¹³⁷ the subject's experience of reality as transgressing the limits of its previous understanding of the field of symbolic representation creates a realism in which we can know reality only inasmuch as our systematic framework is constantly transgressed by experience. Thus, the paradox is between our conceptual understanding of reality and our subjective experience of actuality. This reading is opposed to the one presented in the present work as it makes the conceptual move of too quickly dis-connecting Kierkegaard from the ontological concerns of the post-Kantian idealist tradition which sought to think the relation of subject and object rather than their radical disconnect and the effect this has on the subject's epistemological faculties. Along with this, Braver remains committed to a reading of Hegel in which spirit (*Geist*) reaches a final synthesis within human history and thus enables us to have objective knowledge of reality. With this reading, he then sets up an opposition between Kant, for whom noumenal reality is forever outside our epistemological capacity, and Hegel, whom he thinks outlines a system in which logical thought makes it capable to have absolute knowledge of the whole.

Braver outlines the stakes of this transgressive realism, which occupies a space between the either/or offered by Kant and Hegel as such:

Not only is there an outside, as Hegel denies, but we can encounter it, as Kant denies; these encounters are in fact far more important than what we can come up with on our own. The most important ideas are those that genuinely surprise us, not in the superficial sense of

¹³⁷ See Lee Braver, *A Thing of this World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007)

discovering which one out of a determinate set of options is correct, as the Kantian model allows, but by violating our most fundamental beliefs and rupturing our basic categories.¹³⁸

So Braver contends that 'transgressive realism', a position he finds in the writings of Kierkegaard, allows us to acknowledge that there is in fact an outside to thought (something he finds absent in Hegel) and that while we can never have objective knowledge of this outside, we can still encounter aspects of this reality which forever elides our desire for epistemological certainty. In a simple sense it seems that Braver is here wanting to argue that Kierkegaard's theory of the instant represents these experiences in which we momentarily gain access to the outside of thought. As Braver goes on to argue:

[...] thus, Kierkegaard's view combines Kant's admission of limitations on our (metaphysical) understanding with Hegel's rejection of noumena, without thereby falling into the latter's arrogant anti-realism.¹³⁹

It should be clear at this point that the dichotomy set up by Braver is completely dependent on the idea that Hegel offered an 'arrogant anti-realism' in which there is no outside to subjective thought and that the world is completely contained in the structure of thought.

While this interpretation of Hegel is not unorthodox, I have already shown that a transcendental materialist reading of Hegel allows us to move past a reading in which Hegel is the philosopher of the totalized absolute, and rather, to a reading in which contradiction and tension are what characterize the structure of the concept, and absolute knowing is knowing absolutely that tension

¹³⁸ Braver, 'A Brief History of Continental Realism', p. 10.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

and contradiction will forever push thought forward past any moment of supposed finality. In this reading Hegel does not avoid the Kantian split between the phenomenal and the noumenal by placing thought and reality wholly on the side of the phenomenal, but instead he takes the gap, or paradox, residing between the phenomenal and noumenal and places this gap within the phenomenal realm itself. Thus the absolute is not located in an external and infinite realm, but instead is paradoxically located on the side of the finite. Žižek outlines Hegel's thinking as such:

Hegel knows very well that every attempt at rational totalization ultimately fails, this failure is the very impetus of the "dialectical progress"; his "wager" is located on another level- it concerns, so to speak, the "squared totalization": the possibility of "making a system" out of the very series of failed totalizations, to enchain them in a rational way, to discern the strange "logic" that regulates the process by means of which the breakdown of a totalization itself begets another totalization. What is *Phenomenology of Spirit* ultimately if not the presentation of a series of aborted attempts by the subject to define the Absolute and thus arrive at the longed-for synchronism of subject and object? This is why its final outcome ("absolute knowledge") does not bring about a finally found harmony but rather entails a kind of reflective inversion: it confronts the subject with the fact that the true Absolute is nothing but the logical disposition of its previous failed attempts to conceive the Absolute- that is, with the vertiginous experience that Truth itself coincides with the path towards Truth.¹⁴⁰

So if one is willing to grant this reading serious consideration, then it is possible that the dichotomy set up by Braver to utilize Kierkegaard as a sort of dialectical synthesis between Kant and

¹⁴⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 99-100.

Hegel is a moot point, as it is possible that Hegel himself already recognized that our attempts at logical finality are little more than failed attempts to finally grasp the truth and that the moment of absolute knowledge essentially involves recognizing, in an extremely Kierkegaardian fashion, that the truth *is* in fact the very journey towards the truth. If this is the case, then Braver's comment that "Hegel remains Kierkegaard's arch-enemy"¹⁴¹ makes very little sense, and seems to only perpetuate the worst tendencies of 20th century interpretations of Kierkegaard. This is particularly troubling, as the previously mentioned work of Jon Stewart has rendered the rhetorical force of speaking of Kierkegaard as the ultimate anti-Hegel historically indefensible. It is surprising that Braver completely ignores any mention of Stewart or similar work and offers a reading of Kierkegaard completely outside the context of contemporary interpretations of Kierkegaard. This is even more troubling as he is using Kierkegaard to represent a position he presents as a crucial and under-recognized moment in the development of continental philosophy, 'transgressive realism.'

Along with this, Braver does not mention the texts in which Kierkegaard actually outlines the systematic and philosophical aspects of his project, texts such as *CA* and *SUD*. Once again, this lack of attention to the serious systematic project present in Kierkegaard's own thought strips Braver's argument of much of its force and leaves one wondering why he relies on a fairly common-sense understanding of Kierkegaard to mark what he sees as a crucial moment in the history of philosophy. It is interesting that Braver moves on to outline the post-Kierkegaardian history of 'transgressive realism' by looking at the way this perspective informs the projects of both Heidegger and Levinas, a reading which can be found in a whole host of secondary texts already existing on Kierkegaard.

¹⁴¹ Braver, 'A Brief History of Continental Realism', p. 9.

Before moving on, I will briefly outline how the present transcendental materialist reading of Kierkegaard differs from Braver's position of transgressive realism. In a certain sense, these positions seem similar, as both focus on a paradoxical split, or gap, that marks the being of subjectivity and its experience of reality. The crucial difference lies in where ontological priority lies. For Braver, Kierkegaard's ontology would be fundamentally post-Kantian, in that it holds that there is a split between two distinct orders of being, with our subjective and finite experience on one side and the objective world of truth on the other. For Braver, the Kierkegaardian corrective to this Kantian framework is that the subject can experience paradoxical instants in which we have momentary aspect to the objective structure outside our subjective experience. My reading, on the other hand, considers Kierkegaard in a post-Hegelian and more accurately a post-idealist, ontological framework. Rather than thinking of reality as possessing two distinct realms, this framework considers reality itself as inherently and incessantly fractured. So it is not the case that we exist in the realm of the finite and the necessary and that at special moments possibility breaks in to our world in a moment of divine transcendence. Rather, reality itself is pregnant with possibility and is itself the dynamic contradiction of the infinite and the finite, of possibility and necessity. Thus, it is not the case that we live in a finite and stable world in which God is a wholly other infinite source of transcendent truth that occasionally breaks in and provides moments of illumination, but rather that in the ultimate paradoxical act God in fact became man. This is why Kierkegaard focuses so much on the paradoxical nature of Christ. It is not the case that God merely appeared to be human, or that the divine momentarily possessed a particular human being; instead Christ was both fully human and fully divine, or fully infinite and fully finite. To once again quote Žižek's own Hegelian reading of Kierkegaard on this point:

In Christianity, the gap that separates God from man is not directly “sublated” in the figure of Christ as God-man; it is rather that, in the most tense moment of crucifixion, when Christ himself despairs [...], the gap that separates God from man is transposed into God himself, as the gap that separates Christ from God-Father; the properly dialectical trick here is that the very feature which appeared to separate me from God turns out to unite me with God.¹⁴²

Later in this chapter I will work out the implications of this form of paradox in re-considering the dichotomy between immanence and transcendence often used by Kierkegaard.

At this point it should be clear that Kierkegaard’s account of the development of consciousness provides both a critique of the limits of reflection, as well as an account of the necessity of decision and action in the development of the self. In terms of the critique of reflection, we have seen that Kierkegaard orients the first half of *SUD* around an exploration of the various attempts of a largely Fichtean model of consciousness in overcoming despair, which is primarily a despairing to will to be oneself. In part I Kierkegaard shows that while consciousness is able to dialectically progress from a basic form of immediacy’s despair to a more advanced and self-reflective form of despair, the self (which is spirit) remains unable to break out of the deadlock which is reflection’s despair.

In part II Kierkegaard provides the religious solution to the problem of despair: faith. Through facing the paradox between ideality and actuality, spirit wills a decision and is able to progress beyond despair through a decisive act. Once again, we must reiterate that faith is in no way a synthetic act that resolves a contradiction for spirit, but rather a holding together of the

¹⁴² Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 106.

contradiction in a willed act. Faith is possessed by the one who decides that because of the contingency of being and the openness of the future that anything is possible and that any immanent system of logic fails whenever it attempts to fence in logic and possibility. In this sense we could think of those involved in the American civil rights movement as embodying the shift in consciousness outlined in Book II of *SUD*. While an immanent system of logic (race relations in 1960's America and the institutionalization of Jim Crow segregation laws) made it very clear that racial equality was something completely outside of the bounds of the political possibility of the state, the faith of those involved in the civil rights movement allowed them to recognize the possibility contained in the future and the contingency of any system of logic which claimed to be totalizing. This faith thus allowed those involved to move forward without any guarantee of success.

3.3 Reflection and Consciousness

Before moving forward it is important to briefly outline the distinction between the concepts of reflection and consciousness in the work of Kierkegaard to avoid any confusion. The realization of the self as spirit is not a development of the faculty of reflection, but rather, the activity of becoming consciousness. Reflection consists of opposition without interest, or as previously stated, opposition without a moment of decision. In this sense reflection is a negative relation between two opposed moments. Pure reflection operates wholly in the realm of possibility and thus in political terms a politics of reflection would consist of reflecting on political reality and future possibilities for political projects, but only in terms of pure possibility. Thus, reflection represents the pure possibility of a relation between ideality and actuality without a movement towards decision and subsequent activity. As Kierkegaard says in *Johannes Climacus, or, De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, “reflection is the *possibility of the relation*; consciousness is *the relation, the first form of which is contradiction*”

and “consciousness, therefore, presupposes reflection” (PF/JC 169). He goes on to state, “reflection is *disinterested*. Consciousness, however, is the relation and thereby is interest” (PF/JC 170).

Interest (or, decision) serves as a key moment signifying the progression from reflection to consciousness, as it marks spirit as a third element embodying the dialectical relation between two elements of the self, in this case ideality and actuality. We can here see once again that the development taking place from *CA* to *SUD* does not attempt to position reflection as the solution to the previously outlined problems of immediacy, but rather that the move from immediacy to reflection is just a more deeply problematic account of the development of the self (spirit). While in reflection we have advancement from anxiety (ontological) to despair (anthropological), without decision (interest) reflection is little more than an infinite feedback loop of spirit’s inability to actually become a self.

This can also allow us to briefly mention another oft-used Kierkegaardian trope in our systematic analysis, repetition. In terms of the development of consciousness repetition signifies the continued collision of ideality and actuality in the movement of spirit’s process of becoming a self. In this manner repetition signifies the non-totalizable nature of both spirit and reality, as the developing structure of both means that the dialectic of consciousness, or spirit, is never complete, or in other words has no final moment of synthesis. Rather, even when spirit succeeds in decisively willing the ideal in the real, reality (which is marked by facticity) keeps developing, so spirit has to continually develop in its dialectical relation between factual necessity and possibility. Repetition is thus the constant and non-totalizable process of spirit’s dialectical becoming. In more typically Hegelian terms, repetition serves as a reminder that every dialectical overcoming is followed by another higher level of contradiction that follows the same structure. While it is often argued that

the concept of repetition serves as Kierkegaard's critique of Hegelian mediation, Jon Stewart has argued quite the opposite, noting that:

What Kierkegaard calls "repetition," at least in this context, is what Hegel means by the relation of universality to particularity. The only way one can recognize a sensible particular as a repetition is by virtue of a universal concept that one already possesses. Without universals there would be no repetition since there would only be a plurality of dissimilar particulars. By the same token, without particulars there would be no repetition since there would be only eternal universals, which could never repeat. Thus, repetition can take place only in the relationship between the two. This can be regarded as the epistemological groundwork for the notion of repetition, a groundwork that Kierkegaard borrows from Hegel. This conclusion – that the notion of repetition arises from an analysis of Hegel's discussion of consciousness – is striking since Kierkegaard seems ultimately to want to use the notion of repetition to criticize Hegel's notion of mediation.¹⁴³

Thus, every time spirit forces the collision of a contradiction (between ideality and actuality, finitude and infinitude, etc.) it repeats the process of positively working through the contradiction, but once again, this movement is never final and the contradiction simply reaches a higher level. To return to the previously used example of a love relationship in exemplifying the role of faith and decision, we can also see how this sort of relationship exemplifies repetition. While the initial declaration of love involves a faithful decision, the continuation of this process involves repetition. For example, after the initial decision between two lovers, they will be faced by a number of

¹⁴³ Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, p. 288.

uncertainties and contradictions along the way. Is this really the person I should be in love with? Is our relationship really a good thing? In the face of these moments the committed lover will repeat their initial declaration and once again take a faithful leap into the contingent future of loving another individual. This repetition is thus not a simple and exact duplication of the initial decision, but a faithful re-inscribing of this choice in a host of different circumstances as love progresses. This example shows how decision, faith, the leap and repetition all work together to give a picture of the process of the becoming of the self.

Faith is then the manner by which any sort of ethical or metaphysical totality is replaced by possibility as the absolute (which we could equally argue is an absolute contingency), as possibility for Kierkegaard corresponds precisely to the openness of the future.¹⁴⁴ As Elrod puts it, “the self’s necessity is its possibility.”¹⁴⁵ This also reinforces why Kierkegaard was so insistent on spirit being the activity of freedom. This is the case as the possibility contained in the future creates an openness that places freedom at the heart of the becoming of consciousness. Finally, the concept of the instant which was introduced in the previous chapter also comes into play at this point, as this concept signifies that the present is pregnant with the possibility of the infinite and this moment (the instant) occurs during the collision of/in consciousness previously described. So the instant serves as the event by which spirit is spurred on in its process of becoming by re-inscribing its field of possibilities in the realm of the necessary with the openness of the infinite. As Elrod argues, “this instant is the negation of time in the sense that its successiveness is momentarily negated.”¹⁴⁶ Thus the instant is the moment of the negation of the present for the sake of the freedom of spirit that is

¹⁴⁴ John Elrod, *Being and Existence in Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Works*, p. 235.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 236.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 239.

made possible by the contingency of the future. Thus the instant is not a moment *in* time, but the interruption *of* time as a successive process of subsequent moments.

3.4 God and Transcendence

Before moving on to further consider the socio-political possibilities contained within this reading of Kierkegaard's development of reflection and its accompanying despair, I would like to take a detour in the opposite direction and consider two over-lapping concepts at the heart of Kierkegaard's project: God and transcendence. While thus far I have provided a largely systematic, or ontological, reading of the thought of Kierkegaard, it could rightly be asked if his commitment to religion and in particular the Christian theological tradition, precludes the possibility of fully realizing the proposed aim of this study, to provide a properly ontological and political reading of Kierkegaard's thought through a transcendental materialist framework. Through a re-consideration of the systematic function of the concepts of God and transcendence in the work of Kierkegaard, I will show that Kierkegaard remains much more indebted to the tradition of idealist philosophy than he is to the systematic framework of Christian theology. I will begin by extending the ontological reading already outlined in this work to include the concept of God as it appears in *SUD* in a manner that shows that this concept signifies absolute possibility more so than it refers to any determinate theological or personal conception of the divine. Next, I will argue that the dichotomy between immanence and transcendence posited in Kierkegaard's work is no longer relevant in the context of the currently philosophical climate and that a transcendental materialist reading of Kierkegaard leaves open the space for both Kierkegaard's critique of idealist philosophy while allowing for the foundational idea that self rests transparently in another.

For a thinker so strongly associated with the Christian tradition, it is important to note that Kierkegaard has shockingly little to say about the actual theological content of this tradition. As Jon Stewart has recently noted, Kierkegaard's Christianity is basically content-less and says little if anything about the actual theological structure underlying this system of belief. Stewart also notes that when compared to the work of his historical 'enemy' Hegel, we see that Hegel provides a fully systematic account of Christian theology that far outweighs anything offered to us by Kierkegaard. This lack of a discussion of the theological content of Kierkegaard's Christianity has made it all too easy for religious thinkers with a host of theological commitments to adopt Kierkegaard for their own personal usage and impose a variety of theological contents into Kierkegaard's purely formal account of religion.

Stewart has outlined this issue through his critique of Kierkegaard's account of appropriation and its distinction from the idealist concept of abstraction.¹⁴⁷ According to Stewart, Kierkegaard associates the idealist tradition with abstract thinking, which is a wholly objective form of thinking that often equates to a sort of reflection concerned with establishing the conditions for rational thought. Kierkegaard counters this form of abstract reflection with the idea of appropriation, which he sees as being a subjective rather than an objective concept. Rather than focusing on the universal conditions for thought (as in abstract thinking), appropriation is concerned with the movement from the universal to the particular and this appropriation is capable of differing due to the character of the particular individual and is thus a subjective rather than an objective concept.

Following this, Kierkegaard sees appropriation as necessitating external action rather than a merely inward belief in the rationality of an idea or concept. Thus, abstract thinking equates to a

¹⁴⁷ My discussion of Stewart relies largely on two lectures given at the Hong Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota during the summer of 2011. Work based on these lectures has been published in Stewart, *Idealism and Existentialism: Hegel and Nineteenth and Twentieth Century European Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2010). In particular, see chapters 5 and 6.

purely rational, and thus reflective, manner of thinking, while appropriation involves the decisive willing of an ideality into actuality by a particular individual. Abstraction is a category of thought, while appropriation is a category of activity, or put differently, abstraction is an internal category of thought while appropriation is an external category of existence. This distinction helps us to further understand Kierkegaard's critique of reflection, as when consciousness is thought wholly in reflective terms, thought will also remain primary over action and there exists no necessity to stop the process of reflection for the sake of decisively willing an idea in the realm of actuality.

Kierkegaard clears the space for his theory of appropriation by drawing a sharp distinction between philosophy (an abstract mode of thinking) and religion (a subjective mode of existence). In minimal terms, philosophy is concerned with only the ideal conditions for thought, while religion is concerned with the way in which individuals appropriate ideas and subsequently actualize them in externality. The curious aspect about this distinction between philosophy and religion, as previously mentioned, is that Kierkegaard uses what Stewart terms a 'minimal conception of Christianity' to emphasize this necessary separation of the philosophical and religious spheres. Rather than providing a particular theological content for this religious form of subjective existence, Kierkegaard's minimal Christianity provides a content-less form of religious practice in which it is not the what but the how that matters, or put differently, subjective appropriation matters more than objective theological abstraction. So Christianity, for Kierkegaard, operates as a structural theory of praxis more than it operates as a determinate theological content that is meant to foster belief. In this sense Kierkegaard clearly follows the book of James which claims that believers "not be merely hearers of the word, but doers of the word" (James 1:22).

We can see this theory of religion as praxis in another of Kierkegaard's works, *For Self Examination/Judge for Yourself*, in which he quotes the previously mentioned verse by St. James (FSE

25). In this text, which is one of Kierkegaard's up-building religious discourses, he describes the "rigorously religious individual" as practicing a life that is "essentially action" (*FSE* 11). Thus, the man of religion is not described in terms of his theological commitments or church participation, but for his appropriation and activity. Highlighting the openness of the concept of faith as outlined in the present chapter, in this text Kierkegaard says that "faith is a restless thing", once again emphasizing the manner in which the life of faith does not equate to a final synthesis of the dialectical contradictions contained within consciousness, but rather, that faith is an affirmation of the constant process of self-becoming inaugurated by the emergence of spirit through sin as a foundational and absolute negation (*FSE* 17). So we see that even in one of his more explicitly Christian texts, religion has more to do with the voluntary than it does with the theological or any moment of dialectical finality and the properly religious mode of existence is one marked by appropriation and not merely rational agreement.

Christian appropriation thus serves as a way of highlighting the distinction between philosophy and religion as for Kierkegaard one is concerned with the 'what' of abstract thinking and the conditions for thought while the other is concerned with the 'how' of decision and action. Following this it seems hard to imagine Kierkegaard ever engaging in a serious theological debate regarding the merit of any particular systematic theology or philosophy of religion, as even though the content of these engagements would be religious, the form would still remain wholly abstract. Once again, we need to be clear that this critique of abstract thinking does not entail a full scale critique of philosophy as such, but simply of an abstract philosophical system which thinks itself capable of creating the conditions for activity and the actualization of ideals in reality. As Kierkegaard states in another text, if the Hegelian thinker would have finished the system of logic and said it was a grand intellectual exercise, everything would have been fine, but the system oversteps its bounds inasmuch as it assumes itself capable of accounting for existential reality as well

(CUP 34). Thus for Kierkegaard the religious is a step beyond abstract thinking in so far as it builds upon the conditions for thought arrived in through systematic thinking for the sake of outlining the conditions for activity and the actualization of ideals in reality. It is not as if Kierkegaard wants to abandon abstract philosophical thinking all together, but simply that he wants to convince us that philosophy will only take us so far and at a certain point it is up to the willed activity of engaged individuals to make an impact in actuality. At this point we can say that religion is a manner of engaged and willed appropriation. If philosophy thinks, religion acts.

Now that we have seen the basic distinction drawn by Kierkegaard between abstract thinking and appropriation and the distinction he subsequently draws between philosophy and religion, we can take a step further into even murkier theological territory and investigate both the religious and philosophical content of Kierkegaard's conception of God. While many commentators on Kierkegaard have provided explicitly theological accounts of Kierkegaard's conceptions of both God and religion, these accounts seem to usually have more to do with the commentators own personal theological and religious commitments (usually of a fairly conservative variety) than they do with any determinate theological content outlined by Kierkegaard himself.¹⁴⁸ Thus it is commonly the case that a theologian or Christian philosopher will simply import their own theological content into Kierkegaard's religious structure in a manner that makes it shockingly easy for Kierkegaard's own thought to quickly become little more than an existential precursor to 21st century protestant evangelicalism. I would like to avoid this sort of dogmatic misreading by attempting to interrogate the systematic content of the concept of God in Kierkegaard's own writing.

¹⁴⁸ Examples of these theological interpretations include: Christopher Ben Simpson, *The Truth is the Way: Kierkegaard's Theologia Viatorum* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishing, 2011), C. Stephen Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), Kyle Roberts, *Emerging Prophet: Kierkegaard and the Postmodern People of God* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishing, 2013).

It is in *SUD* that Kierkegaard gives one of the most straightforward descriptions of God to be found anywhere in his authorship, stating that “God is this-that everything is possible” and “that everything is possible means the being of God” (*SUD* 40). At this point, rather than providing any theological content describing a divine creator possessing anthropomorphic characteristics, he simply says that God signifies absolute possibility and that the existence of this possibility signifies the very being of God. One could rightly read this description of God and wonder whether or not Kierkegaard was not simply equating God with the previously described despair of possibility, in which one experiences despair from becoming wrapped up in possibility to the point at which they become paralyzed and lose all contact with the necessary. This is the same form of despair experienced by the one wholly wrapped up in the infinite by which they lose all contact with the finitude and facticity of existence. While this may seem like the case, it is important to note that in the first instance Kierkegaard introduces this definition of God in the section of the text concerned with the despair of necessity, in which what one lacks is precisely the sort of possibility contained in the existence of God. As Michael Theunissen notes in his study of this text, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair*, “The Leap into the abyss of the idea that everything is possible for God appears as the only way out of a situation in which nothing is possible for the person anymore.”¹⁴⁹ Thus this position, of God as possibility, is arrived at only through dialectically overcoming the despair of necessity in which nothing at all seems to be possible for the individual. Theunissen further differentiates the possibility arrived at through faith in God from the possibility of despair by arguing that:

But the ‘everything is possible’ of belief is different from the ‘everything is possible’ of unlimiting despair because it has gone through the ‘nothing is possible’ of limiting despair. It

¹⁴⁹ Michael Theunissen, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair* trans. Barbara Harshav and Helmut Illbruck (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 86-87.

leaves the despair of possibility behind by acknowledging the limitation established in the establishment of the self; and it sets itself apart from the despair of necessity by finding consolation in the idea of a God for whom everything is possible.¹⁵⁰

Thus the distinction has to do with the self recognizing the limits placed on them by their fundamental state of contradiction between possibility and necessity, infinity and finitude, subject and object; while at the same time acknowledging that for God everything is possible and while the self always exists in the entangled freedom of its own contradictions, absolute possibility is that power which is absolutely outside the self and which has established it. To once again quote Theunissen, “a person who is entirely wrapped up in possibility does not submit to the necessity of the self, and a person who is drowned in necessity is not open to the possibility in God.”¹⁵¹

In chapter two I outlined the manner in which the *Afgrund*, or abyss, at the heart of existence, which creates the conditions for the experience of anxiety by the subject is the ontological condition for the possibility of both good and evil. If we read these two texts (*CA* and *SUD*) as charting the continued development of spirit we see that the *Afgrund* of *CA* serves the same systematic and ontological function of God in *SUD*, only in a more dialectically developed manner. Following this logic, we can see that rather than representing a divine personality or an absolute substance, the concept God signifies the absolute possibility (or, contingency) that resides at the heart of reality.

Following the previously used quote about God being equivalent to possibility, Kierkegaard goes on to connect this seemingly ontological concept to the importance of lived actuality, stating, “only he whose being has been so shaken that he has become spirit by understanding that everything is

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

possible, only he has anything to do with God” (*SUD* 40). So the individual who has something to do with God is not the committed Christian believer with an allegiance to a dogmatic system of belief, but rather, is the one who has traumatically encountered the *Afgrund* at the heart of existence and has come out of this traumatic encounter with an understanding of the sheer possibility at the heart of reality. This is a far cry from a traditional theological conception of God and one that makes it possible to construct a systematic reading of Kierkegaard that is detached from any theological conception of the divine. In this reading, the human is qualified as spirit only inasmuch as their being has been destabilized by a traumatic encounter with a power that is absolutely prior to their own existence.

One of the few commentators that have interpreted Kierkegaard’s definition of God in *SUD* in a fashion similar to the one outlined in this chapter is David Wood in his essay “Thinking God in the Wake of Kierkegaard.”¹⁵² One of the first things that Wood notes in his essay is that in the opening pages of *SUD*, in which Kierkegaard says that the formula for not being in despair is that the self ‘rest transparently in the power that established it’, that Kierkegaard says ‘the power that established’, i.e., he says ‘power’ and not ‘God’. In Wood’s analysis, this is to make the structure of the argument formal, which then leaves the possibility open that it is a relation to something other than God that allows us to truly become ourselves.¹⁵³ The point of Wood’s argument here is that the point of the relation to God in the work of Kierkegaard may have more to do with the mode of relation, than it does the thing that is related to. Thus for Wood, it may be the case that a political movement or a lover may be that which we relate to in order to more fully become ourselves.

¹⁵² David Wood, “Thinking God in the Wake of Kierkegaard”, in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, eds. Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

As Wood notes, referring to a passage from *CUP* (199-200), “here Kierkegaard makes it clear, first that God is a mode of relationship, and secondly, that God is a subject, not a thing.”¹⁵⁴

Following this, we see that God can be conceived as a mode of relation, and in particular, the God relation is itself a particular mode of subjectivity rather than an object. Reversing the commonplace understanding of divinity, our being is called into question by the very subjectivity of the divine. God is thus a mode of subjectivity marked by the instability characteristic of the infinite. Wood goes on to remark on the previously discussed passage from *SUD*, saying that, “similarly, Kierkegaard’s comment that ‘since everything is possible for God, then God is this - that all things are possible’, could be interpreted as a way of organizing one’s Being in the world. God is being glossed as hope.”¹⁵⁵ So if God is equivalent to the idea that everything is possible, then the being of God can equally be equated to the being, or possibility of, hope. This hope thus becomes a factor in orienting one’s subjectivity in the world. If one’s subjectivity is characterized by this hope, then their field of possibility will not be limited by the facticity of objective scientific analysis, or as Kierkegaard thinks it, the epistemological claims of logical immanence. Logical immanence, as a supposed totality, is always ruptured by the field of contingent possibility lying forever outside its powers of logical totality. As Wood goes on to state, “to live in paradox is to be suspended in a space of contradiction,”¹⁵⁶ and following this we see that to live in paradox is precisely to accept our situation as one of being constantly related to both possibility and necessity, infinity and finitude, subjectivity and objectivity and rather than attempting to rest in either one or the other, the God-relation signifies the paradoxical possibility of existing precisely within this contradictory fracture. Freedom, as conceived by Kierkegaard, is when as spirit we cease any attempt to exist as either fully infinite or

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 72.

fully finite, but rather when we move in the gap between these two contradictory poles. Once again, Wood seems to highlight this when noting that for Kierkegaard, “the way we are constantly outstrips our knowledge of who we are. In that gap alone, there is dialectical ferment enough.”¹⁵⁷ Thus Wood, without naming it as such, seems to grasp the fractured dialectic at the heart of both Kierkegaard’s account of spirit and religious ontology. We are never simply ‘are who we are’ in an immediate and stable sense because reality itself is never simple ‘is what it is’ in a logically immanent sense. Our freedom in becoming spirit is entangled with the fracture contained within reality itself. In a manner akin to the upcoming political shift in the present study, Wood closes his essay by noting that the practical outcome of his speculative analysis of the concept of God in Kierkegaard is that “there is no other realm, but there are radically different ways of inhabiting this one.”¹⁵⁸ This reading, which dis-associates God from any brand of divine transcendence, allows us to subsequently consider the God-relation as the possibility of creating a variety of different realities in our own world, in opposition to a transcendent conception of religion that is primarily concerned with offering another world that is wholly exterior to our own.

The crucial ideas offered in Wood’s essay are his re-consideration of the role of immanence and transcendence in Kierkegaard and his interpretation of the ‘God is possibility’ equation offered in *SUD*. By reading God as signifying radical possibility and not something wholly other existing outside of our own realm, Wood avoids the either/or of immanence or transcendence by considering the sort of transcendence that rests in the primacy of an immanent account of reality. Thus, the possibility signified by the being of God is not something that exists in a wholly other realm, but is rather something contained in the very gaps and ruptures within our experience of reality itself. This allows Wood to stay close to Kierkegaard while still being able to state that ‘there

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

is no other realm', as for Kierkegaard, the point is not to prove the existence of another world, but to instead show how we can never have a totalized experience of this world.

What Wood, in his own Derridean inflected manner, opens up in his reading is a legitimate path to re-think the tension between immanence and transcendence in the work of Kierkegaard, particularly as it relates to the religious. This is crucial as one of the ways in which Kierkegaard's project is often distinguished from that of the German idealists is through the argument that Kierkegaard's thought rests on the attempt to argue for a conception of freedom in transcendence, while for the idealist the project is precisely to develop a similar conception of freedom but one which resides in a wholly immanent brand of Spinozist monism. Wood's reading deviates from this tendency as he grounds freedom in the gap occurring within the structure of reality itself, and subsequently in the self, in a manner quite similar to the readings of Hegel outlined in chapter one of this work. While Wood's reading represents one of the most provocative of thinkers operating in a largely post-phenomenological deconstructive framework, another provocative interpretation of the same concepts in Kierkegaard, this one offered by Hegelian-materialist Slavoj Žižek, takes things a step further by offering an interpretation that brings Kierkegaard surprisingly close to the dialectical materialist tradition. If with Wood we have seen the limits of a postmodern interpretation of Kierkegaard's conception of God, Žižek takes the same passage and concepts and interprets them through the lens of a Hegelian influenced transcendental materialism.

In his work *The Parallax View*, he dedicates much of the crucial ontological chapter, entitled 'Building Blocks Towards a Materialist Theology', to a discussion of Kierkegaard, carrying the subtitle 'Kierkegaard as Hegelian'. Provocative titles aside, Žižek's reading offers one of the first genuine attempts to provide a thoroughly materialist reading of Kierkegaard without doing so in a way that skirts around 'embarrassing' concepts such as God and the religious. While discussing

Kierkegaard's relation to Hegel, Žižek remarks on what he sees as the key formula of Kierkegaard's religious ontology:

Kierkegaard's God is strictly correlative to the ontological openness of reality, to our relating to reality as unfinished, "in becoming." "God" is the name for the Absolute Other against which we can measure the thorough contingency of reality – as such, it cannot be conceived as any kind of Substance, as the Supreme thing.¹⁵⁹

Thus, Žižek too highlights the manner in which God is equivalent to possibility in such a way that God signifies ontological openness and at the level of subjectivity, our relating to reality as 'unfinished' or 'in becoming' shapes the way in which we understand the structure of our own subjectivity. One of the implications of this is that we can never conceive of either the absolute or our own individual subjectivity as any sort of stable and logically totalizable substance. While in some senses this seems similar to the reading previously offered by Wood, Žižek has very different philosophical intentions in mind, as he says in the same work, "a thin, almost imperceptible line separates Kierkegaard from dialectical materialism proper."¹⁶⁰ While Wood seems to aim at placing Kierkegaard in a line of largely post-phenomenological ethical figures such as Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, Žižek is only interested in Kierkegaard inasmuch as he sees him as occupying the intellectual space of a strictly post-idealist philosophical framework. This means that Žižek is less concerned with what Kierkegaard's work can tell us about our phenomenological experience of the world and the way in which this encounter affects our personal subjectivity and more with the manner in which Kierkegaard outlines a structural account of both self and world and the manner in

¹⁵⁹ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 79.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

which freedom is at the heart of both this theory of subjectivity and ontology. It is telling that while Wood more-or-less argues that a ‘thin, almost imperceptible line’ keeps Kierkegaard apart from the deconstructive tradition proper, Žižek insists on the similarity between Kierkegaard and dialectical materialism, a tradition often at odds with deconstruction.

Dialectical materialism, the Marxist idea that Hegel’s logical system is a theory that describes the inherent contradictions contained in material relations and structures, may sound like a far cry from the religious works of Kierkegaard, but Žižek’s provocation is not without merit and he goes on to argue that the gap characteristic of the religious in Kierkegaard follows the same structure as the parallax gap at the heart of his own materialist conception of reality. For example, while a dialectical materialist would explain the movement of history through contradictions contained in the very materiality of reality, we have already seen that Kierkegaard explains the becoming of subjectivity as spirit through the contradictions at play in the core of the structure of the self.

Žižek, who reads Kierkegaard as still occupying an anti-Hegelian position, argues that “[...] does not the main thrust of Kierkegaard’s anti-Hegelianism reside precisely in his effort to break this Hegelian closed circle, and open up the space for contingent cuts, “jumps,” intrusions, which undermine the field of what appears to be possible?”¹⁶¹ So while continuing the misreading that places Kierkegaard at absolute odds with Hegel’s idealism, Žižek correctly points out the fact that at the heart of Kierkegaard’s project is the affirmation of a contingent possibility that is constantly undermining our own field of possibility. This possibility, also called God, is what renders the project of constructing a field of logical totality impossible, as these cuts, jumps and intrusions will always haunt our desire for totality and completeness.

¹⁶¹ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 77.

After providing his ontological interpretation of Kierkegaard's key religious formula (God is possibility), Žižek goes on to extend this to its subjective implications in a manner once again parallel to Wood's deconstructive reading. Žižek goes on to argue that, "God is "beyond the order of being," he is *nothing but* the mode of how we relate to him; that is to say, we do not relate to him, he *is* this relating."¹⁶² Once again we see an interpretation in which the key issue of the God relation in Kierkegaard is not the substance or nature of God, but rather, the sort of relation inaugurated through this concept. It is worth noting that while this may strike some as stripping the concept of all its theological significance, the apostle John himself wrote, "God *is* love" (1 John 4:8, NIV). It is telling that the scripture says nothing of the nature of substance of God, but simply that God is love, and love itself is a mode of relation, not any object or metaphysical substance. We here see what Kierkegaard meant in the passage from *CUP* quoted by Wood when he stated that God is subject, not object, as God exists as love that is a mode of relation. Following this, we can see how Wood and Žižek both open up the path for us to think about the manner in which a Kierkegaardian form of subjectivity can account for religious relations to things other than organized Christianity, as the key factor in determining the God relation is love and one could just as equally lovingly relate to a partner, a political movement, a work of art or a scientific innovation. This follows another of Kierkegaard's comments in *CUP* in which he states, "the how of the truth is precisely the truth" (*CUP* 323). So to relate to God is to do with how one relates to something rather than what it is one relates to.

What we see in this example is that even Kierkegaard himself is saying that it is not the formal content and institutions of Christianity that are important, but rather the form of belief present, the how and not the what. Thus it seems that one could reasonably conceive, in a manner following the reading previously laid out by Wood, of being able to religiously relate to activities

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 79.

other than the formal practice of Christianity. It is important to note, however, that because it follows the structure of the religious laid out by Kierkegaard, this mode of relation and form of commitment continue to operate in terms of paradox and not mediation, which means that there is still no guarantee that one's pursuit will necessarily succeed even if one approaches their endeavor with all of the passion of infinity.

So even if one is passionately and religiously committed to a political cause, it could always fail; if one is religiously committed to a lover, they could always leave; and if one is committed in this way to a line of scientific innovation, it could always turn out to be a waste of time. Thus, as long as the contingent possibility of God haunts our field of logical possibility, things can always be otherwise. To once again quote Žižek:

We are never safely within the Religious, doubt forever remains, the same act can be seen as religious or aesthetic, in a parallax split which can never be abolished, since the “minimal difference” which transubstantiates (what appears to be) an aesthetic act into a religious one can never be specified, located in a determinate property.¹⁶³

Thus we have seen that Žižek opens up the possibility of reading Kierkegaard's formula 'God=Possibility' as signifying the fundamental ontological contingency of reality, and that for Wood, this allows the practical implication of there being religious modes of existence to a whole host of non-theological commitments. Put differently, because possibility and contingency are at the heart of reality, we can be religiously committed subjects to a whole host of life orienting projects (love, science, art, etc.) which may seem difficult or even impossible, but through a faithful and religious commitment one can still orient their subjectivity around these projects.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 105.

3.5 The Matter of Despair

Through this ontological encounter with the theological content present in this text (*SUD*) I am now able to more explicitly outline my own systematic reading of Kierkegaard's project. While he obviously does not intend this, after the development of both dialectical materialism and discoveries in contemporary science, we can see that Kierkegaard offers an explicit account of the nature of human subjectivity, along with an implicit account of the nature of reality, which is in line with the project of transcendental materialism which was outlined in the opening discussion of the present work.

It is important to note that if nothing else, consciousness, as dialectically developed subjectivity, is the product of contradiction for Kierkegaard. This contradiction, or gap, which characterizes the very nature of consciousness, is what puts the whole process into motion by inaugurating the process of becoming a self. There is a contradiction present in the very core of the self and the attempt to resolve this contradiction is what spurs forward the development of the self. However, as we have seen, any attempt of consciousness to resolve this contradiction in a manner wholly immanent to its own activity can only lead to various types of despair. These attempts occur when consciousness attempts to resolve its contradictory nature by attempting to be 'just one' of its dialectical elements. For example, consciousness will attempt to be wholly finite, or wholly infinite -- wholly marked by necessity, or floating wholly in possibility. Faith is then the movement out of despair through an acknowledgment that consciousness is always grounded in something that forever precedes its own existence and this primordial act is forever outside the reach of the activity of reflective consciousness. This is what Schelling refers to as un-pre-thinkable being, which as

Markus Gabriel states, "is therefore merely that which, no matter how early we come on the scene, is already there."¹⁶⁴

So consciousness is characterized by its state of contradiction and is absolutely preceded by and grounded in something that is wholly other to its own existence. At this point it is crucial for my argument to note the similarity between the structural account just provided and the central structural features of transcendental materialism, an ontological position I outlined in the introduction. Transcendental materialism (hereafter TM) is primarily an ontology of subjective freedom, but one which aims to ground human subjectivity in the material rather than anything prior to the emergence of materiality. One of the primary features of TM is that it also characterizes subjectivity through a series of contradictions, or gaps. On one level, there is a gap in the very structure of the subject itself, a blind spot that creates the space for spirit, or freedom. On another, the subject is always irrevocably split from that which grounds it. We see the same two-level structure in Kierkegaard's account of consciousness and its relation to externality. In the most minimal terms possible, there is a split at the core of subjectivity and a split between the subject and the objective foundation of this subject. In Kierkegaard's terms that from which the subject finds itself irrevocably split is God (or, its *Afgrund*), while for the TM position, it is matter itself from which the subject and freedom as spirit, emerges. It is important to note that the TM position does not rule out the possibility of the subject being spirit, as TM does not rule out the possibility of the existence of phenomenon that can only be accounted for as more-than-material. Unlike an immanent naturalism in which all phenomenon are explained in fully reductive and naturalist terms, TM aims to leave room for more-than-material subjectivity that is grounded in the material. In this sense we could say that TM is neither a wholly immanent or transcendent ontological account, but rather, one in which transcendental conditions are generated from immanent materiality and the

¹⁶⁴ Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology: Essays in German Idealism* (New York: Continuum, 2011), p. 65.

contradiction in the core of matter leaves open the possibility that present material conditions can be transcended through future events and the emergence of novel conditions.

Adrian Johnston offers the clearest formulation of the ontology of TM in his work Žižek's *Ontology*, where he states that:

The break induced by the more-than-material subject splitting off from its material origins is irreplaceable, opening up an impossible-to-close gap, a non-dialecticizable parallax split. The transcendental materialist theory of the subject is materialist insofar as it asserts that the Ideal of subjective thought arises from the Real of objective being, although it is also simultaneously transcendental insofar as it maintains that this thus-generated Ideal subjectivity thereafter achieves independence from the ground of its material sources and thereby starts to function as a set of possibility conditions for forms of reality irreducible to explanatory discourses allied to traditional versions of materialism.¹⁶⁵

So for the TM position there are transcendental and ideal subjective conditions, but these conditions emerge through a fundamentally materialist basis. In this sense TM arrives at a position which can account for both materialism and idealism while avoiding a traditional account of naturalism which attempts to provide an explanatory apparatus which renders transcendental freedom an impossible category.

¹⁶⁵ Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, p. 275.

The point of this brief excursion into the ontology and theory of subjectivity of TM has been for the sake of going on to show that considering Kierkegaard's as a systematic pre-cursor to TM allows us to use Kierkegaard's structural account of subjectivity and ontology to critique some of the shortcomings of some of the prominent political theories which have come out of TM. To accomplish this I will now transition to an explicitly political reading of Kierkegaard's work and its implications for subjectivity.

3.6 From the Psychological to the Social

While the text that this chapter has been primarily in dialogue with, *SUD*, was concerned with providing a structural account of how the ontological structure of Kierkegaard's work bears on the level of the anthropological, *Practice in Christianity*, the other text published under the name Anti-Climacus and conceived during 1848 was called, by Kierkegaard, "an attack upon the established order." (*PC* xvii) Although this text's concern with issues of society and the political diverge greatly from Kierkegaard's inward and ethical texts, Kierkegaard himself wrote that *Practice in Christianity* was "without a doubt [...] the most perfect and truest thing I have written" (*PC* xviii).

In one sense this text, which was meant to be the final section of Kierkegaard's projected volume 'Collected Works of Consummation', serves as the work in which he most explicitly outlines what it means to be what he considers a properly existing religious individual. While in some senses being an overtly religious and even pastoral, text, *PC* at the same time stands as Kierkegaard's most overt social and political critique and it provides a social, or outward, exemplification of the inward project of *SUD*. If *SUD* gave an account of how spirit dynamically develops the free self, *PC* provides an account of how the properly self-relational individual would relate to others at the social and religious level.

Kierkegaard's stated intention for *Practice* is the re-introduction of Christianity into Christendom and he finds this to be a necessary task because since all were considered to be Christian in his time, no one was actually expected to live as a Christian. So in a sense, Kierkegaard uses this text to re-present Christianity in a way that makes it seem new, or difficult, to his intended Danish audience. Rather than presenting Christianity as a set of facts or assertions that can be agreed or disagreed with in objective fashion, Kierkegaard here presents Christianity in what he refers to as indirect communication, the point of which is to make subjective decision absolutely necessary in the matter. In this way he is not only attempting to re-think the nature of religious existence, but also the nature of belief. According to Kierkegaard, Christ cannot be known, but only believed, and thus Kierkegaard confronts the objective and indecisive religion of his time with a religion that necessitates subjective belief and decision. This is the main goal of Kierkegaard's indirect communication, to create a space in which one must decide to enter the process of becoming a religiously existing individual. This process of belief is the structure of faith highlighted in the discussion of *SUD*.

One of the key moves made by Kierkegaard in his re-presentation of Christianity is the illegitimate light he shines on the person of Christ, noting that Christ was, and is, "literally a nobody" (*PC* 64), and that both during his age, as well as the present age, the existence of Christ is one considered illegitimate by those in power. Rather than attempting to gain honor and prestige in the eyes of the state, Kierkegaard emphasizes that Christ disdained all worldly prestige and thus the Church should be characterized by this same disdain for the prestige and recognition of the state. Kierkegaard goes on to argue that the motto by which Christ's relationship to the established order can be characterized is that he is illegitimate and uses Christ's saying that one not put a new piece of cloth on an old garment to imply a willingness to not recognize the established order, but instead to do away with it to make room for the new. At this point Kierkegaard is clear that his conception of

Christ and of religious existence in general is not one characterized by a willingness to reform, but rather one that conceives the new as emerging through a revolutionary change. It must be noted, however, that Kierkegaard does not find the revolutionary core of Christianity in what Christ does, but rather in the fact that in the eyes of the established order he does absolutely nothing and is literally nothing. This very nothingness, or negativity, which characterizes Christ, is the very thing that Kierkegaard sees as bringing him into collision with the established order.

One of the prime concerns of *PC* is how one is to live in relation to the established order. According to Kierkegaard, one must avoid being consumed into the outwardly focused life that is the crowd, or mass, of the established order. For Kierkegaard, “to live in such an established order, particularly to be something in it, is a continuation of being tied to mother’s apron strings” and as long as one continues to exist as part of this established order, they will be able to “calculate the probability and spinelessly exempt oneself from the least little decision” (*PC* 90). Kierkegaard’s prime contention against the established order is its failure to force individuals to make decisions, and exist as the single individual. Here Kierkegaard sets the stage for a collision between two opposites, the single individual and established order. In a similar sense, he sets a religious existence against a secular existence and whereas the present age has turned them into essentially the same thing, or at least has made them compatible, Kierkegaard wants for there to be a infinite contrast between the religious and the secular so that the properly religiously existing individual will be nothing but an offense to the secularity of the established order. It is worth mentioning at this point that this opposition of religious and secular should not be considered as simply the theological versus the non-theological. Instead, the religious signifies transcendence as a fundamental openness towards the possibility contained in the future. This is a primarily ontological rather than a dogmatic orientation and being religious primarily has to do with the manner in which one relates to the essential contingency characteristic of reality. The secular in this sense then signifies the calculated,

the reflective and the logical. This mindset is one in which reflective logic is capable of establishing what is right and wrong, what exists and what does not and what is deemed possible and impossible. While the secular mindset functions with an immanent logic, the religious mindset is one open to the contingency inherent to the development of reality.

The most significant social critique present in *PC* is the distinction made by Kierkegaard between the triumphant Church and the militant Church. This distinction is explicated primarily in section V of the text, which Kierkegaard opens with a prayer containing the lines “[...] keep us also from this, that we delude ourselves into thinking ourselves to be members of a Church already triumphant here in this world” (*PC* 201). One of the primary differences Kierkegaard identifies between the triumphant Church and the militant Church is the role of truth in the life of each. For the triumphant Church, truth is something settled, and something that can be objectively (and most importantly non-relationally) known by the individual. In this sense, truth is a logical and totalized fact which one agrees with abstractly rather than believes in through appropriation. For the militant Church however, “Christ is the truth in the sense that to *be* the truth is the only true explanation of what truth is” (*PC* 205). For the individual who is a part of the militant Church, truth must be something which is related to and appropriated on an individual basis and thus Kierkegaard notes that “the being of truth is the redoubling of truth within yourself [...] that your life, my life, his life expresses the truth approximately in the striving for it [...]” (*PC* 205). According to Kierkegaard’s religious understanding, “truth is obviously not to know the truth but to be the truth” (*PC* 205).

This emphasis on truth as something like a task, or infinite process, gives the militant Church a subjective and social aspect not necessary in the triumphant Church. To be a part of the militant Church, the individual must first be properly related to the truth through a redoubling of this truth within himself or herself. In line with the manner in which the self is theorized in *SUD*, one must first be properly related to themselves through a relation to something outside themselves

before they can properly relate to anything else. Thus the emphasis on inwardness found in *SUD* is not eradicated by a social participation in the militant Church, but rather is consummated into the social relation around a common truth.

Along these same lines, Kierkegaard draws another distinction between the triumphant Church's insistence on adoration and the militant Church's insistence on imitation. While the triumphant Church upholds a vision of Christ as one to be admired and worshiped, the militant Church requires individuals to imitate the works of Christ in actuality. This distinction is grounded in the fact that for the triumphant Church, established Christendom *is*, it exists as such, rather than existing only as in the process of becoming. The militant Church cannot possibly exist in this way because to the established order the existence of a truly militant Church is a complete impossibility and thus this Church never *is* but instead is constantly engaged in the infinite process of becoming. Because of this stark distinction Kierkegaard will go as far as to remark, "this Church triumphant [...] resembles the Church militant no more than a square resembles a circle" (*PC* 212). This also makes it clear that attempts to co-opt Kierkegaard's thought by dogmatic theologians are often misguided, as he makes clear that his version of religious practice bears little relation to established and dogmatic Christian practice.

Within his discussion of the two distinct churches, Kierkegaard makes an interesting statement in regards to representation. He notes that the majority of individuals in the triumphant Church are "content with perceiving themselves in the order that represented them" (*PC* 214). Here Kierkegaard makes an important observation, that a majority of individuals during his time consider themselves to be Christians because the dominant order, that of established Christendom, represented them as such. We can thus see that rather than existing as properly relational selves qualified by the development of spirit, individuals looking to the triumphant Church (or equally, the state) for their self-representation are attempting to be related to by the order in power without

necessarily relating to themselves through this order. In opposition to this relation-less representation, Kierkegaard argues that in the Church militant, direct recognizability is impossible and being a member of the militant Church is expressed in contrast to what the order in power represents as being a Christian (or, a citizen). Kierkegaard makes this move to emphasize the error in equating being a citizen with being a Christian during his time. Because he finds it necessary that the militant Church be a suffering Church, Christianity needs to disassociate itself from the system in power and once again exist (or better, in-exist) on the margins of what is socially represented. Succinctly stated, Kierkegaard is arguing that as soon as all are considered to be Christians by the triumphant Church, then none are actually Christian as dynamic subjective activity is no longer necessary.

While on a cursory reading the continuity between *SUD* and *PC* may not seem glaringly obvious, a reading which considers these texts together makes it clear that the latter serves as an extremely valuable social exemplification of the former. Along with the manner in which *PC* continues to tell the story of *SUD* at the social level, it can also be seen that this text assumes the ontological structure outlined in *CA*. The openness to futurity and contingency, and the space for decision and faith present in the church militant are grounded in the *Afgrund* that is at the heart of the ontological picture present in Kierkegaard's work. The connection between anxiety, ontology and the social can be seen when we consider the church militant and triumphant in their relations to anxiety about the good and anxiety about evil.

One can here see a clear connection between the notion of anxiety about good and evil in *CA*, and Kierkegaard's notion of the militant and triumphant churches in *PC*. Because truth is always an infinite and open process without the possibility of a finite completion, Kierkegaard argues that the true church, the one properly related to the structure of properly religious truth, is the militant church. This church never makes a claim to absolute or objective understanding and is

constantly aware of the contingency contained in the unknowable future. Because of this, those participating in this church must always be open to reform and change. Kierkegaard develops this in opposition to the church triumphant, for whom truth is already settled and objectively knowable and there is no necessity to be open to the contingency of the future, because reality is already closed off into a finite set of possibilities. To this form of religious practice, decision and faith lose their crucial importance, as one can simply agree with the truth propositions inherent in a certain institutional dogma and be recognized as a member through their agreement with it.

This second example, of the church triumphant, exemplifies Kierkegaard's notion of anxiety about the good, which he also refers to as the demonic. This is the anxiety experienced by the one who was not able to make the final leap into the abyss of freedom and is still attempting to posit some finite means as their ground. According to Kierkegaard, the demonic is thus "unfreedom that wants to close itself off" (*CA* 123). Rather than acknowledge the infinite openness of the future, the self who is anxious about the good (which is freedom) is avoiding the good at all cost, as "the good signifies the restoration of freedom" (*CA* 119), and this restoration would bring with it the acknowledgement of the contingency of the future and the lack of any stable ground for the self. Because the good carries with it Kierkegaard's notion of the instant, this opens up the possibility for radical interruption or novelty, and this sort of novelty would be the ultimate threat to the attempt of the self to close itself off from all otherness or interruption. We see this exemplified collectively in Kierkegaard's notion of the church triumphant, as this is a social body that is attempting to ground itself in an immediate relation to a possession of an absolute truth and which is subsequently closed to any and all otherness or contingency. On this point we can see Kierkegaard's fears about a philosophical system working in the service of totality, as a system that begins from a position of logical totality and then attempts to describe actuality in the same terms could have no way of thinking about the freedom and contingency contained in the future. Following Kierkegaard's

example of the church triumphant, we can glean a picture of what he fears the implications are of totalizing metaphysical projects at the level of the social and political. When the space for the emergence of spirit (as the gap existing between subject and object, possibility and necessity, infinitude and finitude) does not exist, then freedom as such does not exist. Without the possibility of the free and dynamic development of spirit (which is freedom), there is no longer any room for contingency, and thus no necessity for decision and faith. The triumphant church represents the effect this sort of totalized metaphysic has on the capacity for freedom at the social and political levels.

At this point it should be clear why Kierkegaard's theorization of the internal relation of the self as spirit becomes consciousness offers a structure that does not stop at the individual. Rather, through an analysis of a more social text we see that the same sort of fractured relation which makes possible the free activity of the individual self is what subsequently allows for free activity on the collective level. At the heart of both individual and collective freedom is the anxiety experienced through the realization that things could always be otherwise and that no necessary and absolute structure exists, whether it is the ontological or political. In the next chapter I will shift to an overtly political analysis of this fractured dialectic.

4: Anxious Politics

4.0 Introduction

In the previous two chapters I have outlined a systematic and ontological account of Kierkegaard's specifically philosophical project through a consideration of the development of the underlying ontological structure presented in *The Concept of Anxiety* and the further development of an anthropological account of consciousness in *The Sickness unto Death*. Through this analysis I have shown that the ontological core of Kierkegaard's authorship emerges through his critical appropriation of the project of German idealism and that rather than being most accurately considered to be a pre-cursor to twentieth-century existentialism or phenomenology, Kierkegaard's thought can best be seen as a continuation of the critical project of thinkers such as Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. This method has allowed me to outline a reading of Kierkegaard's project that provides a non-theological account of the main motifs and developments of his thought without leaving any of the religious aspects behind. Crucial to this non-theological reading has been providing a purely ontological reading of the concept of God and a praxis-based concept of the religious. This has left us with a clear picture of both Kierkegaard's ontology and anthropology and the way in which the account of reality that emerges in his work paves the way for a particular picture of subjectivity, or in other words, the development of spirit. Now that I have outlined this ontology and anthropology, I would like to take a step further towards the development of a political interpretation that builds upon the ontological and anthropological reading I have already developed.

The first step of this political interpretation will consist of differentiating between the reading I am providing and previous attempts to draw a political theory out of Kierkegaard's authorship. It is my contention that while structurally sound, a majority of these previous attempts ultimately fail insofar as they draw no connection between the ontological and political aspects of

Kierkegaard's authorship. Further, it is my contention that this disconnect between the ontological and the political in previous attempts is a symptom of the misguided tendency to read Kierkegaard's work as a wholly critical attack leveled against the metaphysical project of German idealism and thus as sharing no ontological relation to the thinkers of that tradition. I will briefly outline some of the more notable previous attempts to read Kierkegaard politically and point out the insufficiencies of each of these attempts while affirming the accurate aspects of each.

After a critical assessment of these previous attempts, I will outline my own political reading of Kierkegaard, which I will refer to as a political ontology, as it rests wholly on the previously outlined ontological interpretation of his authorship. It is crucial to note that I am not claiming to simply be uncovering some robust political theory that was there all along simply waiting to be decoded by one with some sort of special intuition; rather, I am attempting to build upon Kierkegaard's ontology and anthropology, along with his varied comments on society and the political, to develop what could be called a Kierkegaardian political ontology. My concern here has less to do with the historical context of Kierkegaard's social critique in Golden Age Denmark and more with considering what Kierkegaard's thought has to offer political debates in a 21st century philosophical context. In simple terms, I will extrapolate the relational structure of Kierkegaard's ontology and anthropology to bear on the way in which we can conceive of social and political relations. Along with this, Kierkegaard's critique of reflection will be used to bear on the contemporary age, which seems to exemplify his critique of the social and political outcomes of reflective thought in a way that bears an eerie resemblance to our contemporary age of constant media culture and digital chatter.

It is also worth noting why I am using the term political ontology to describe my political interpretation rather than a more traditional term such as political philosophy. This is due to the fact that rather than provide any real descriptive or prescriptive political philosophy, the ontological

structure at the heart of Kierkegaard's authorship gives us a picture of the potentials of political possibility which we can then read alongside his account of the development of human subjectivity. Rather than providing an account of how politics and society *should* be, Kierkegaard's work can offer us with a novel manner of considering the underlying ontological conditions to political possibility in general, along with an account of how human subjectivity can function at the level of the political.

At the conclusion of this chapter it should be clear that Kierkegaard, when read through a properly materialist perspective, is surprisingly at home in the philosophical debates surrounding 21st century transcendental materialism. In particular, it will be seen that Kierkegaard connects an ontology grounded in contingency and possibility, with an anthropology that develops a relational account of the human as constantly developing and becoming, which coalesce in an ultimately relational political theory which grounds political institutions and movements in the openness of a reality grounded in the contingency of an *Afgrund*. While I have been utilizing the theoretical standpoint of transcendental materialism throughout this thesis, this chapter and the next will make this perspective more explicit as I relate my systematic account of Kierkegaard's thought to the primary thinkers and tendencies of contemporary materialist philosophy.

4.1 Previous Political Readings

While there have been various recent attempts to reckon with the social and political implications of Kierkegaard's thought, in the current context I will briefly discuss two works which share a similar theoretical outlook to my own interpretation. My aim is simply to give context to my own discussion and show the manner in which my reading differs from previous attempts to develop a political interpretation of Kierkegaard. The first of these texts, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* by Merold Westphal presents a reading that places Kierkegaard in a tradition of post-Marxist ideology critique. The second, *The Politics of Exodus* by Mark Dooley, places Kierkegaard

in the context of postmodern philosophy to push the ethical and political implications of his thought. I will show why I find both works to move in the right direction while ultimately falling short of an ontologically grounded political interpretation of Kierkegaard.

In his *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* Merold Westphal argues that Kierkegaard is the precursor to Marx in regards to the development of an ideology and sociology of knowledge. According to Westphal this critique of the reason and society of his age in no way qualifies as irrationalist, but instead serves as a critique of a historically specific form of reason. Thus Kierkegaard is not against the idea of a systematic form of reason as such, but against the idea that a historically constructed and particular form of reason is regarded as universal in its scope. For Westphal, this critique of reason and advocacy of a certain form of individualism is not a-political or a-social, but rather presents a radical form of politics and social relation that begins from a critique of the socialization of the individual.

While it is easy to interpret much of Kierkegaard's critical language as particularly religious or other-worldly in orientation, Westphal sees this manner of speech as inherently political in nature, arguing that "prophetic speech is conspicuously out of step with the spirit of its times [...], It is always the speech of the minority."¹⁶⁶ In this way Kierkegaard's political critique can be seen to operate from the perspective of the minority, where those on the outside of the system in power provide a prophetic call for a new world to come. Westphal goes on to state, "the prophets deny the continuing validity of the old institutions, sacred and the secular, of the nation."¹⁶⁷

Following this discussion of the role of the prophetic in Kierkegaard's writing, Westphal notes "by interpreting the present in terms of the future instead of the past, it becomes possible to see the present in bold new ways."¹⁶⁸ Here Westphal is reading Kierkegaard as advocating a politics

¹⁶⁶ Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), p. 14.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

in which the possibility of future events illuminates the possibilities contained within the present situation. This reading seems to point to an element of subjective forcing in Kierkegaard, in which the openness of the future allows those in the present age to attempt to create political and social realities that currently seem to be impossible, or at least improbable. This would also account for the social and political role of faith, as faith would be the subjective attitude of the one affirming that what is currently seen as impossible can be possible in the future through the willed activities of subjects.

Westphal continues:

Kierkegaard knows that social groups make themselves legitimate through the propagation of the belief systems in which the established order is justified. He recognizes the degree to which this process determines what is to count as reason in any given context.¹⁶⁹

Here we once again see Westphal pointing out the fact that Kierkegaard is not against reason as such, but instead against the way in which established orders utilize reason to determine what is ‘new’ or ‘true’ according to their own immanent terms. In language used previously in this thesis, this further exemplifies that for Kierkegaard truth is always something transcendent that is capable of breaking with the immanent logic of a particular situation. In this sense the religious is belief in the seemingly absurd that the order in power deems illegitimate and the activity of faith is the process of subjectively attempting to actualize these beliefs.

Westphal notes, “we should not be surprised if Kierkegaard’s politics is more like Marx’s than Plato’s in its form,”¹⁷⁰ but that this parallel with Marx is purely formal. Kierkegaard’s political diagnosis centers on a lack of subjectivity and the failure of people to be passionately committed

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 22-23.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

religious individuals, while for Marx a critique of more-than-individual social structures is necessary. In this way Westphal thinks that Kierkegaard locates the flaw of Hegelian philosophy and the logic of the 'present age' in their shared tendency towards a self-deification of the 'we'. Kierkegaard's criticism, according to Westphal, is that "we are not saved by socialization, but by subjectivity." Thus Kierkegaard seeks to "un-socialize the individual in order to un-deify society."¹⁷¹

In a manner which is in line with my own argument, Westphal does claim that one of the biggest issues with the previous attempts to read Kierkegaard politically is that these "[...] readings suffer largely through a failure to notice how deeply Hegelian Kierkegaard is on two points."¹⁷² He goes on to outline these two Hegelian aspects of Kierkegaard's thought:

The first step to understanding Kierkegaard's politics is to recognize that he shares with Hegel this conception of spirit and the dialectical individualism contained therein. Being dialectical, this individualism is a social theory of human experience, inherently political in a broad sense.¹⁷³

And:

The second important Hegelian element in Kierkegaard's politics is the dialectical manner in which he defends dialectical individualism.¹⁷⁴

So Westphal, in a manner I wholly agree with, argues that the failure to recognize the fundamentally Hegelian, and thus dialectical, conception of the spiritual self often ends up precluding a reading which locates the political aspects inherent to this version of subjectivity. While I agree with this

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

aspect, I hope I have previously outlined why he still fails to go far enough. By focusing only on the Hegelian elements of Kierkegaard's theory of the self, he once again avoids the underlying ontological conditions that allow the possibility for this form of dialectical account of spirit in the first place. So while Westphal takes the constructive step of acknowledging the underlying dialectical structure of the self, he fails to venture a step further towards a consideration of the underlying ontological conditions that make this form of self possible in the first place. If Westphal is correct in arguing that we must take more seriously the Hegelian conception of the dialectical self at play in Kierkegaard's authorship, he falls short in not arguing that previous political readings have failed to begin from the idealist origins of Kierkegaard's conception of philosophy as such.

Mark Dooley's *The Politics of Exodus* is one of the few works that can be considered a full-scale political treatment of Kierkegaard's authorship. In this work he offers an ethical and political reading that pushes the limits of how we can read the religious in Kierkegaard in the wake of the religious writings of Jacques Derrida and other postmodern thinkers. For Dooley, Derridean deconstruction has made it impossible for us to think in terms of metaphysical totality in any classical Hegelian sense.

Along with this emphasis on thinking through Kierkegaard in the wake of deconstruction, Dooley also aims to problematize readings that focus on the absolute inwardness of the Kierkegaardian self, thus leaving little serious room for a political interpretation. As Dooley states:

My fundamental objective is to dispute these claims by arguing that Kierkegaard's notion of the self does not result in isolated subjective interiority divorced from all social interaction,

but rather one that seeks to engender a notion of community existence, and which therefore has much to offer the contemporary reader.¹⁷⁵

Dooley goes on to describe the aims of his study as such:

So this book has, in effect, two central aims: first, to make a case for Kierkegaard as a committed thinker who had an ethico-political sensitivity; and second, to show how far in advance of their time were the ethical and political ideals he espoused.¹⁷⁶

Much of Dooley's reading is dependent on a consideration of the manner in which outward forces and other individuals are necessarily involved in the formation of the inward Kierkegaardian self, as he argues:

In short, the self for Kierkegaard is not acontextual, but rather the product of multifarious contextual forces that precede it. [...] The whole point of Kierkegaard's work, I contend, is to demonstrate how the self can and must challenge the *modus operandi* of the prevailing political order so as to render it more sensitive to those for whom it is responsible.¹⁷⁷

Dooley also takes note to not ignore the necessarily theological nature of Kierkegaard's writing and this leads him to considering the manner in which the religious and the political can be seen as related. In a manner that is reminiscent of the re-consideration of the theological which was

¹⁷⁵ Mark Dooley, *The Politics of Exodus: Søren Kierkegaard's Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), p. i.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. XXII.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 10,11.

presented in chapter three of the present work, Dooley argues:

For Kierkegaard, therefore, God is not a *what*, or the subject of disinterested objective analysis; God is, rather, a *how*, or a practical and active engagement with others in the world.¹⁷⁸

Here Dooley is describing Kierkegaard's conceptualization of God as something that signifies an active and subjective engagement with the external world rather than as a transcendent deity outside of the bounds of the subject that simply necessitates solitary worship. Thus Dooley connects the possibility contained by this active understanding of God with the possibility of external political activity.

While he does not go into the relationship between Kierkegaard and German idealism in a systematic or ontological sense, he does take time to distinguish what Kierkegaard is attempting to do from any sort of totalizing Hegelian project. As he states:

Hegel opened a new dawn for philosophy. However, in formulating a teleological dynamic, he cheated the forces of time and change. The future in this model is not an open-ended horizon of possibility, but another phase in *Geist's* evolution toward absolute fulfillment.¹⁷⁹

We see here that Dooley is staying firmly within the bounds of a traditional reading of Hegelian idealism in which spirit is on a necessary and one-way progression towards a final moment of synthetic unity in absolute knowing. For Dooley, the political stakes of Kierkegaard's relation to Hegel involve a prioritizing of contingency over and against the necessity he identifies is at the heart

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 95.

of Hegelian logic and metaphysics. Dooley outlines the political stakes of this dichotomy between Hegelian dialectical necessity and Kierkegaardian paradoxical possibility when he states:

To be truly responsible, for Kierkegaard, is to affirm the possibility of imagining otherwise, of calling into question what has been traditionally celebrated as truth, reason, ethics, and community with a view to making each of these structures own up to its contingent configuration.¹⁸⁰

While I agree with Dooley's assertion that for Kierkegaard one of the key social and political issues relates to recognizing the contingent configuration of forms of reason, ethics and community, it is interesting that for him this is a product of an absolutely non-metaphysical reading of Kierkegaard. As I have been outlining in this thesis, I claim that it is instead the case that it is precisely through an ontological consideration of the works of Kierkegaard that we arrive at a point at which contingency is a necessary category not due to our inability to ever grasp the structure of reality, but because reality itself is riddled with fracture and contingency.

As is one of the primary contentions of this thesis, the shortcomings and lack of ontological consideration in Dooley's reading seems to come from a continued insistence that there can be no such thing as a metaphysical or ontological interpretation of the works of Kierkegaard and that our best bet for developing a political interpretation involves breaking with the metaphysical to consider the absolute abyss which separates us from any sort of understanding of the absolute. Something both Westphal and Dooley share in common is a lack of insistence on the ontological structure at the heart of Kierkegaard's work and it is clear that much of this lack comes from a neglect of a serious consideration of the manner in which German idealist philosophy set the stakes for

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 107.

Kierkegaard's own project. As will be shown, my interpretation differs inasmuch as the real political potential of Kierkegaard's authorship emerges precisely through a serious ontological consideration.

4.2 The Present Age

While Kierkegaard never presented any comprehensive system of political philosophy (or theology), the text that most clearly exemplifies the social and political consequences of the ontological and anthropological structure is the essay 'The Present Age' which was published alongside his 'A Literary Review' in the collection *Two Ages*. In particular, it is my contention that this brief text gives us just enough of an idea of Kierkegaard's views on socio-political critique to allow us to tie together the ontological and political aspects of his work into a larger political ontology which accounts for the connection between ontological structure and political possibilities.

Before moving forward, however, it is necessary to make a few remarks on the connection, or more precisely the lack of any necessary connection, of the ontological and the political. In recent years there has been an increasing debate as to the precise connection between the ontological and the political, with some arguing that particular ontological structures imply a certain form of political practice and structure, while others holding that this conflation between the ontological and the political is a mistake to be avoided at all costs. Rather than fully endorse one of these approaches, I will instead argue that following Kierkegaard we can say that the consideration of ontological conditions is absolutely necessary when attempting to rigorously think the political. This is not the case because a particular ontological structure implies a necessary socio-political structure and form of praxis, but is rather the case because a careful ontological consideration opens up the space for a proper consideration of political possibilities. There is no such thing as an ontology in which the structure of a radical communist alternative to contemporary capitalism is somehow built in to the

structure of matter itself. To use the stage as an example, it is not the case that ontology writes the script for political activity, but merely that it builds the stage upon which the actors can perform in a variety of ways. The ontological creates the space and conditions for political action, but it does not dictate any particular sort of politics that is in any way ingrained into the structure of being. In the same manner in which logic does not lead to any necessary action on the part of individual human activity, ontological structure does not necessarily lead to any sort of collective political activity. The political is thus always the outcome of willed, contingent activity carried out against the backdrop of the pure possibility-of-possibility inherent to the structure of reality.

This seems to follow directly from the ontological and anthropological analysis carried out in the previous two chapters, where it was made clear that for Kierkegaard, reflective thinking does not equate to actual existence or activity and just because a concept is rational does not somehow place it into actual existence. Thus, it is not the case that just because we develop a highly rational political theory that there is any necessary reason for this theory to be actualized. A space of contingent fracture always remains between the positing of an ideal and its actualization and this space is precisely the possibility of decisive and willed subjectivity. Following this it becomes clear that if we are to claim that there is a connection between the ontological and the political in the thought of Kierkegaard, then there is equally a connection between both of these concepts and subjectivity. In a sense, we could say that subjectivity is the contingent third term that relates to the opposed poles of ontology and the political. Without the willed activity of subjectivity, there would be no way in which ontological structure would ever play any part in the formation of political actuality, but subjectivity operates precisely as a relation that relates to itself through its relations to both the ideal conditions of the ontological and the actual conditions of political reality. Following this we can say that for Kierkegaard subjectivity is precisely the manner in which the ontological comes to bear on the actual and in particular, that politics is precisely the name for the collective activity of subjects

attempting to actualize a political ideal after a decisive break from the activity of reflection. I will return to a systematic outline of this political ontology, but for the time being, would like to offer a brief analysis of 'The Present Age' to provide a basis for my attempt to draw a political philosophy out of the seemingly non-political and anti-systematic writings of Kierkegaard.

'The Present Age' is essentially a critique of the mode of socio-political subjectivity and relationality implicit to speculative, or reflective, thought. Kierkegaard calls the social and political conditions created by speculative thought the present age, which is contrasted with the age of passion (or revolution) which is the social and political structure which more clearly reflects Kierkegaard's own views on the contingency of both ontology and the structure of subjectivity.

Kierkegaard identifies the present age as one of "understanding and reflection, momentarily bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose" (*PA* 33). He goes on to note, "a revolutionary age is an age of action; ours is the age of advertisement and publicity" (*PA* 35). Because this age is grounded in an account of reality which believes itself capable of totalizing the field of possibility through logical reflection and the equation of logic with actuality, individuals in this age are thus little more than professional observers, losing themselves in the crowd and simply waiting for history to unfold on its own before their reflective gazes. They wait for something to happen, but sadly, it is often the case that nothing ever does. Since all are caught in a motionless sort of reflection, there is no longer any emphasis on the necessity of action or decision at the level of the individual subject (*PA* 36).

During his critique of the age of reflection, Kierkegaard comes as close as he ever does to an implicit critique of the logic of capitalism when remarking, "in the end, therefore, money will be the one thing people will desire, which is moreover only representative, an abstraction" (*PA* 40). He goes on to note that in the age of reflection, where all things become mere abstraction and there is no longer room for the contingent possibility of truth, men will say, "give me money [...] and I am

saved” (*PA* 41). Rather than the sort of self relating subjectivity outlined to various extents in the previous chapters, Kierkegaard is here describing a sort of subjectivity in which one simply relates to the financial abstraction of money to gain a sense of self and existence. In a very simple sense, he seems to point out that under the logic of reflection and abstraction, the more one relates to money (i.e., the more money that one has), the more one truly exists. Here Kierkegaard shows the danger of the marriage between abstract thought and the necessarily abstracting effect of the capitalist economy.

As we have previously seen, Kierkegaard associates abstraction with the attempt to render thought, and life, a completely objective discourse and abstract thinking is a manner of speculation which is completely opposed to religion, which is concerned with life and activity rather than thought and reflection. In this way, we see that he associates the desire for money as a means of satisfaction with abstraction. This means that this desire for money, which believes itself to be a clear representation of objective reality, serves the purpose of pulling one further and further away from a concern with life and actuality, which are properly religious (and thus subjective) categories.

Without the form of relationality which comes from the properly religious form of existence (i.e., the relation to possibility as the absolute relation) individuals will desire the false hope of objective certainty offered to them by money. Prefiguring the yet-to-occur full-scale development of the global capitalist economy in its contemporary model, Kierkegaard notes that this desire for money will serve the role of binding individuals together and thus all will belong to capital as a unifying abstraction and in this abstract unity there exists no fractures or gaps for the free activity of spirit. Thus, the individual is destroyed as she is bound to others in the herd, or crowd, of the present age.

This destruction of individuality is referred to as leveling by Kierkegaard and he defines this process as a “silent, mathematical, and abstract occupation which shuns upheavals [...] at its

maximum the leveling [sic] process is a deathly silence in which one can hear one's heart beat, a silence which nothing can pierce, in which everything is engulfed, powerless to resist" (*PA* 54). This process of leveling acts as the negative unity of individuals, in which one only exists as an abstract part of a useless crowd. As Kierkegaard later states, "leveling [sic] is *eo ipso* the destruction of the individual" (*PA* 54).

We can see that the upheaval Kierkegaard speaks of here is shunned precisely because an upheaval at the social-political level would equate a new structure at the logical level that would invalidate the previously made claims to objective certainty by the age of reflection. Along with this, we see that this negative relationality present between these subjects is a mirror of the sort of 'negative relation' previously discussed in *SUD*. Thus, there is no third term capable of turning this into a positive relation, as there are only two terms: the crowd and the individual.

In opposition to this destruction of the individual carried out by the leveling process of the present age, the age of passion (or, revolution) necessitates that the individual be un-bound from the abstract unity offered by the crowd and exists as a self-relational individual. In this age of passion, which exemplifies the relational account of consciousness (subjectivity) developed in *CA* and *SUD*, reality is posited as radically open and contingent, and the individual is open to the possibility of the emergence of the radically new. In this age of passion the individual is responsible for decision and commitment and rather than attempting to know through reflection, one must strive to believe through the actualization of the possible. Whereas the one existing in the present age can infinitely delay decision through continual calls for further reflection, the individuals of the present age must make a decisive leap for themselves, and cannot rely on the supposed belief of the crowd. As Kierkegaard states, "they must make the leap themselves, for God's love is not a second hand gift" (*PA* 82).

We can thus see how the age of passion provides a socio-political exemplification of the inherently fractured account of reality offered in the previous explication of Kierkegaard's ontological structure. Because thought and being are held apart by existence (*CUP* 123), actual existence necessitates that the freely acting subject make decisive leaps into/over these gaps and fissures in objective reality and continue to work out reality through this infinite subjective process. The socio-political affect Kierkegaard uses to describe this process of subjective existence is enthusiasm (*PA* 34,54,58,84) and he claims that all truly subjective actions begins with a 'leap of enthusiasm' which removes the individual from the 'snare of reflection' and brings one into relation with the infinite, or eternal (*PA* 58). As we have seen in a previous chapter, the infinite, or eternal, is possibility as the absolute.

As we can see, in the present age, thought *is* being and thus reflection is regarded as existence/actuality. In this social ontology, there exists no room from which the subject could emerge, as there remains no 'cracks' in this leveled form of immanence that would necessitate that the individual make a decisive leap of enthusiasm. In this conception of reality, one can simply remain in bed and wait for God to finish its cosmic game of chess. In the age of passion, there is no chess game and if one remains in bed, hoping to be moved, nothing will happen. In the age of passion one must get up, put on their coat, and leap from their doorstep into the contingency of reality. For the one existing with infinite pathos (*CUP* 431) the transformation of reality will only come through this subjective and decisive action.

4.3 The Age of Revolution

While 'The Present Age' provides a fairly straight forward critical picture of Kierkegaard's analysis of the social and political situation of his day, in particular the manner in which this age of reflection has engendered a certain form of subjectivity in which passion, action and decision are no

longer the terms characterizing the process of self-actualization, we can get a glimpse of a more constructive positive program in ‘The Age of Revolution’, which immediately precedes ‘The Present Age’ in the volume *Two Ages: A Literary Review*. Of particular interest to the present study is the manner in which Kierkegaard places emphasis on the age of revolution possessing a particular *form* (or, formal structure), as he states:

The Age of revolution is essentially passionate, and therefore it essentially has *form* (*TA* 61).¹⁸¹

This emphasis on form is crucial for the present study, as Kierkegaard’s particular focus on form over content allows us to conceive of how this particular form of political subjectivity and relationality could be utilized in a contemporary context removed from the religious debates of 19th century Danish society. Kierkegaard goes on:

The age of revolution is essentially passionate and therefore essentially has *culture*. In other words, the **tension** and resilience of the inner being are the measure of essential culture (*TA* 61).

It is interesting to note that the pre-condition for culture, which is a necessarily social and inter-subjective phenomena, is the ‘tension and resilience’ of the inner being. Put differently, the fracture which characterizes the structure of consciousness, which is enabled through a fracture in reality itself, is what creates the internal tension capable of leading to a form of subjectivity in which passion, and subsequently culture, is possible. He goes on:

¹⁸¹ This is particularly interesting as he equates passion and form, two aspects of thought normally considered separate in the contemporary philosophical landscape in which formalism and vitalism are considered to be at odds.

The age of revolution is essentially passionate; therefore it must be able to be violent, riotous, wild, ruthless toward everything but its idea, but precisely because it still has one motivation, it is less open to the charge of *crudeness* (TA 62).

His continued insistence on the essentially passionate nature of the age of revolution is important as this emphasis on passion signifies a continued emphasis on the inwardness of subjectivity. In the previous passage Kierkegaard is clear to distinguish the age of revolution from either a completely inward form of subjectivity in which there is no necessity for action and on the other hand, a crass form of herd-like activity in which individuals are merely caught up in a movement or group without inward relation. Kierkegaard avoids this 'either/or' through an emphasis on the place of the idea (or, ideal) in the formation of subjectivity and subsequent activity. Through relating passionately to an orienting idea, one does not only develop their own individual subjectivity, but is subsequently able to passionately work out the implications of the idea in externality (or, actuality). Once again, we see that Kierkegaard places emphasis on ideality inasmuch as it provides an aim for external and actual activity. Kierkegaard notes the absolute necessity of passion by stating that:

If the essential passion is taken away, the one motivation, and everything becomes meaningless externality, devoid of character, then the spring of ideality stops flowing and life together becomes stagnant water- this is crudeness (TA 62).

This paves the way for one of the most crucial, and in my opinion most overlooked, aspects of Kierkegaard's social thought and one which allows us to once and for all dispense with the critique that Kierkegaard is some sort of acosmic thinker or that he has no ability to theorize relations to

others.¹⁸² In a passage that uses this emphasis on orienting ideas and passion to pave the way for thinking about inter-subjectivity Kierkegaard states:

When individuals (each one individually) are essentially and passionately related to an idea and together are essentially related to the same idea, the relation is optimal and normative. Individually the relation separates them (each one has himself for himself), and ideally it unites them (*TA* 62).

It is worth explicating precisely what Kierkegaard is saying here. He begins by noting that the individual must first be essentially and passionately related to an idea. This is similar to what we have seen Kierkegaard argue in various forms throughout his authorship. To fully develop one's own consciousness, one needs to relate (religiously) to an idea outside of their own reflective capacity that enables them to make the movement of faith and further actualize the becoming of their own subjectivity. In this passage he adds a social dimension to his theorization of the development of subjectivity and notes that through being passionately related to an idea, individuals become related to others who are also passionately related to the same idea. Rather than Kierkegaard alluding to some sort of 'synthesis' between the self and the other, or the individual and the collective, he makes sure to note the tension that necessarily remains in this relation. He does this through arguing that on the individual level the relation separates individuals, inasmuch as each individual needs to passionately relate to an idea on their own, while at the same time, it ideally unites them. This means that tension (a product of a fractured dialectic) remains present at multiple levels.

At the level of the individual, or subjective, the age of revolution means that one must be passionately related to an idea. This passionate relation means that one does not simply agree or

¹⁸² Emmanuel Levinas makes this critique in his article 'Existence and Ethics' in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*

disagree with a movement or idea, but rather, a truly passionate commitment to an idea necessitates a re-orientation in the development of an individuals' subjectivity through the process of attempting to actualize the ideal. Following this, a tension (or in terms we have used previously, the experience of anxiety) remains that reminds the individual of the contingency haunting their project and the necessity of faith in the light of the possibility of things always being otherwise.

This tension is repeated at the level of the social, or the inter-subjective. Rather than individuals affirming the same idea or cause leading to the collapsing of the distinction between individuals and the development of a consistent group, or herd, this collective affirmation creates a tension within the relations of these individuals to each other through the previously mentioned tension of the individual's relation to the idea. For example, if I am a part of a political collective oriented around the idea of equality, this means at one level that I am always aware of the infinite task of actualizing the idea of equality in my own activity. I know that at times I will miss the mark and the temptation to either turn my back on the idea of equality, or the temptation to believe that 'the work is done' and equality has been completely realized, will always haunt my activity. At the level of the collective, I will relate to others in the tension that our own individual relations to the ideas are themselves contingent and in a process of becoming. Thus, it can never be assumed that being a part of the collective means that either my work as a self is finished, or that the work of the collective and its members is finished. One can always turn her back on the idea that orients collective activity, and the risk of completion, or the arrival at some ultimate finality or moment of synthesis, will also tempt the collective. As we have already seen in the discussion of *Practice in Christianity*, the idea that a collective subjective process could ever be complete would lead back to something like the Church Triumphant, something we will soon see Sartre refer to as the institution when he describes a collective founded on free praxis collapsing back into an objective and necessary body without freedom.

Kierkegaard highlights this in a passage worth quoting at length:

Thus the individuals never come too close to each other in the herd sense, simply because they are united on the basis of an ideal distance. The unanimity of separation is indeed fully orchestrated music. On the other hand, if individuals relate to an idea merely *en masse* (consequently without the individual separation of inwardness), we get violence, anarchy, riotousness; but if there is no idea for the individuals *en masse* and no individually separating inwardness, either, then we have crudeness. The Harmony of the spheres is the unity of each planet relating to itself and to the whole. [...] Remove the relation to one-self, and we have the tumultuous self relating of the mass to an idea; but remove this as well, and we have crudeness (*TA* 63).¹⁸³

This ideal distance is thus crucial to avoid what Kierkegaard is calling crudeness. This separation is necessary to avoid the ‘violence, anarchy and riotousness’ of individuals who are simply relating to an idea *en masse*. At the same time, if there is no idea capable of uniting individuals we arrive at crudeness. At this point we see the problematic identified by Kierkegaard when an individual attempts to immediately relate to her own self and at the social level, when an individual attempts to immediately relate to an idea. If the relation is immediate, there is no space from which a tension can emerge that would engender the space for the free becoming of the self and the collective. Put differently, if there is no fracture there is no space for the free dialectical becoming of spirit, or subjectivity.

Put simply, an external idea is necessary to properly relate to oneself, and after this self-relation, a common idea is equally necessary to relate to others. The mistake is made when

¹⁸³ This passage is crucial for the consideration of Kierkegaard’s relation to the work of Alain Badiou that takes place in the subsequent chapter.

individuals attempt to skip the first step and simply join the herd through an immediate relation to an idea. Passion is necessary for me to both become myself and to become a part of a collective set of relations bigger than myself.

We can connect this discussion with the claims made in the previous chapter regarding the meaning of the religious. As I have previously argued, an ontological interpretation of the works of Kierkegaard allow us the possibility of a non-theological interpretation of the religious in which God signifies the possibility of a religious form of relation. Following this line of logic, Kierkegaard goes on to state, “fundamentally, essential passion is its own guarantee that there is something sacred [...]” (*TA* 64). This quote seems to follow a similar and well-known passage in *CUP* in which he states that passion is of primary importance in terms of religious worship:

If someone who lives in the midst of Christianity enters, with knowledge of the true idea of God, the house of God, and prays, but prays in untruth, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting upon the image of an idol-where, then, is there more truth? The one prays in truth to God although he is worshipping an idol; the other prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore in truth worshipping an idol (*CUP* 201).

He goes on to once again emphasize the important of passion in particular reference to the age of revolution, stating:

The age of revolution is essentially passionate and therefore has immediacy. Its immediacy, however, is not the first immediacy, and in the highest sense it is not the final immediacy, either; it is an *immediacy of reaction* and to that extent is *provisional* (*TA* 65).

And:

The age of revolution is essentially passionate; therefore it has *not nullified the principle of contradiction* and can become either good or evil, and whichever way is chosen, the *impetus* of passion is such that the trace of an action marking its progress or its taking a wrong direction must be perceptible. It is obliged to make a decision, but this again is the saving factor, for decision is the little magic word that existence respects (*TA* 66).

At this point Kierkegaard re-articulates the emphasis on passion in a way even more in line with the argument of the present work. He notes that the essential passion of the age of revolution means precisely that it has not ‘nullified the principle of contradiction’, or in other words, this essential passion has not attempted to synthesize any apparent contradiction for the sake of reaching a higher level of truth or unity. In a manner which relates to the argument made in chapter two of this work, he notes that the age of revolution can ‘become either good or evil’ as this age has not attempted to move past the contingency at the heart of our experience of reality which leaves good and evil as equally realizable possibilities. He then notes that ‘decision is the little magic word that existence respects’, which once again emphasizes the manner in which the dynamic process of subjectivity (whether individual or collective) never moves past the absolute necessity of decision in which one must constantly re-commit to a particular trajectory. One thus never decides ‘once and for all’, as if a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ will guarantee any particular mode of existence. The mode of existence characterizing the ‘age of revolution’ is one in which the tension at the level of the individual and the collective opens up the realm of abyssal possibility in which the temptation for failure, inactivity and betrayal will always remain.

While it seems as if Kierkegaard may be placing unequivocal emphasis on an age of action, as over and against a powerless age of pure reflection, he is careful to note that the age characterized by an emphasis on reflective thought is instead very powerful, it simply fails to decisively actualize this power. He goes on to state:

Thus an age that is very reflective cannot for that reason be summarily accused of being powerless, for it perhaps has great power, but it goes to waste in the fruitlessness of reflection (*TA* 66).

Thus it is not the case that reflection is the antithesis of activity, rather, it seems that Kierkegaard here acknowledges that reflection can be the precise pre-condition for activity, with the moment of decision being that ‘magic word’ which is able to bridge the abyss between reflection and activity, or thought and existence. He goes on to emphasize how the age of reflection is in a sense ‘so close yet so far’ from the life of radical activity when he states that:

Instead of bringing forth the child of a god, the silent, taciturn decision, the generation gives birth to a changeling of the understanding that has things at its fingertips (*TA* 68).

Thus the generation wrapped up in the process of speculation and reflection ‘has things at its fingertips’, but its inability to break the cycle of endless reflection with an act of decision leads the generation to be a mere ‘changeling’ which simply transitions from one mode of thought to another without ever radically changing its fundamental orientation or character.

4.4 Political Ontology

Now that I have outlined the elements of political critique to be gleaned from Kierkegaard's 'The Present Age' and 'The Age of Revolution', I will now consider these elements of a Kierkegaardian political critique and analysis against the background of the systematic ontological and anthropological reading offered in the previous chapters. By considering the minimal, but extremely telling, comments Kierkegaard made of an explicitly political nature in the context of this systematic reading, I aim to arrive at what could be called a systematic political ontology which allows us to locate a clear line of connectivity between an ontology, theory of subjectivity and model of political praxis. While at this point my discussion clearly leaves the realm of critical reading or systematic interpretation, I will still contend that even if Kierkegaard himself never aimed at developing anything like a systematic political ontology that the approach developed here is still thoroughly Kierkegaardian and that the theory of political subjectivity which follows is a clear outcome of the systematic and ontological approach developed thus far in this thesis.

To begin, we must once again take as our starting point the ontological structure present in Kierkegaard's authorship that I have referred to as the fractured dialectic. While this dialectic unfolds in a manner Kierkegaard clearly gleaned from the movements of Hegel's logic as its movement is fueled by an attempt to overcome contradiction, it is clear that at its point of origin this ontological structure is grounded, or properly un-grounded, in an ontological point of fracture which makes impossible any claim to a consistent, or immediate, starting point. Just as crucial as the fracture that characterizes the impossibility of a pure beginning is the fact that this fractured dialectic makes an eventual synthetic conclusion, or point of consistent finality, equally impossible. It is thus the case that the structure of both reality and subjectivity are characterized by this fundamental fracture, which leaves both characterized by their movements of becoming. In a traditional idealist

sense, this ontology makes impossible any moment of finality, or ‘absolute knowing’ as it is traditionally conceived.

If there is such thing as absolute knowing in a systematic reading of Kierkegaard, it is a form of faith in which one sacrifices any claim to finality and completion and instead recognizes that God, or the absolute, is the constant possibility of absolute contingency and possibility itself. Thus, the logical desire for absolute knowing turns into the lived perspective of absolute possibility. This relates back to the previously discussed distinction between the philosophical emphasis on abstraction and a more properly religious emphasis on appropriation and the actuality of existence. Absolute knowing, as traditionally conceived, is little more than a logical attempt to abstract thought from the movement characterizing actuality for the sake of arriving at a stable point where thought is no longer haunted by the anxiety of contingency. Following Kierkegaard’s emphasis on appropriation over abstraction, the logic of absolute knowing instead becomes the activity of faith and in particular, the work of love. As I will briefly outline in the concluding section of this work, love serves as Kierkegaard’s response to the logic of final synthesis, as love is an activity that relates two opposed entities while not conflating both into one singular synthetic substance.

To move closer to our political reading, it is important to note how this ontological structure creates the grounds upon which we can concisely outline the systematic contours of Kierkegaard’s own theory of subjectivity. Rather than an anthropological view in which the individual can only ever simply ‘be’ one thing or another as a wholly stable and consistent entity, the individual human being is always engaged in the dynamic process of becoming. All attempts to exist as a sort of stable and consistent totality will forever be haunted by the fundamental inconsistency (or, fracture) at the heart of the subject, or spirit. As I have previously outlined at length, spirit (or the self) *is* the dynamic relation operating between two opposed elements. Thus, the self is never simply just a finite or infinite thing and never operates in terms of pure necessity or absolute possibility; rather,

the self is the dynamic element that relates *between* two opposed terms. The self is itself fractured at its core and this space of fracture creates the conditions for the dynamic freedom of subjectivity. The acceptance of this fracture, at both the ontological and anthropological level, is what characterizes the movement of faith.

We can now clearly see that the same structure that characterizes the ontology of the fractured dialectic repeats itself at the level of the anthropological, or subjective. While at the level of the ontological this fracture creates the conditions for possibility and anxiety, at the level of the individual this fracture creates the conditions for the free activity of spirit and the risk of despair. It is important to once again note that this freedom (at the level of both ontology and subjectivity) is never a 'pure' and 'limitless' freedom, but instead always operates within the tension of opposed elements. In this picture, the dialectic is always already fractured, and freedom is always already entangled.

The next step towards an explicitly political interpretation of Kierkegaard is to take this same systematic structure to the level of the social to analyze the manner in which the fractured dialectic creates the conditions for a political ontology and theory of political subjectivity. To do this we must first extrapolate the structure of spirit at the level of the individual to the level of the relation between multiple individuals. This amounts to taking the relational structure at the heart of each individual and repeating the structure at the level of the relations between individuals. We have already seen that at the level of the individual I am characterized by the freedom of spirit inasmuch as my actual self is the dynamic element which relates to itself through the constant process of negotiating contradictory elements, such as the finite and the infinite, or possibility and necessity. It has already been shown that when one accepts this condition of existing as spirit, through the act of faith, they can avoid the despair of not being able to accept existing in this spiritual manner. To begin to venture towards the social, we can first imagine what this relational structure would look

like when conceived as the relation between two individuals. We already know that in the structure of my own consciousness I never merely ‘am precisely who I am’ as I am constantly developing as the internal relation of opposed elements. Thus, I can never simply be ‘just this one thing’ to another person. At the same time, I am attempting to relate to someone who is also dynamically developing in this same ‘spiritual’ sense. To think about despair at this level, we can imagine what one feels if they attempt to truly know exactly who someone is at a fundamental level. This could be the desire to completely know a family member, friend or lover. As is the common experience of anyone who has ever momentarily thought that they truly ‘knew’ someone, this moment of ‘absolute knowledge’ is usually just that, a chimerical moment during which someone seems to be fully present, followed by a moment at which the individual acts in such a way as to be inconsistent with the concept of them we have arrived at. Attempting to truly know the conceptual core of someone usually only leads to the despair of realizing the impossibility of this project.

The way to move past the despair of this sort of relation would thus be the faithful acceptance that a relationship with another person is equally characterized by the possibility at the bottom of human subjectivity meaning that one only *is* this process of becoming. The relationship with another thus inaugurates another level of relation in which two opposed elements (in this case two distinct individuals) attempt the impossible project of relating to each other, and this dynamic tension properly *is* the relationship with another. It is clear that at the individual level, I never *am* exactly who I *am* at a particular moment and never know exactly what I feel or believe in a stable and final matter. In the case of a relationship with another, they are also inconsistent with themselves in this same fashion. We thus always only relate to each other as two dynamic processes engaged in dual processes of becoming which coalesce into the secondary level of becoming characterizing our relationship. Thus I do not simply cease the process of becoming myself when I engage in the process of relating to another; rather, the two processes work together.

This same process repeats again at the level of the social. We can imagine multiple individuals who are religiously related to a similar idea, whether it is a religious orientation, a political ideal or an artistic movement. As we have already seen in Kierkegaard's critique of the age of reflection, there is no such thing as an immediate relation between myself and a collective, and when this happens, I simply attempt to collapse my own dynamic subjectivity into a collective through the activity of leveling which leads to the creation of a herd. By doing this, I act as if movement and activity are finished, and the group which I align myself with is firmly in the truth. To use an example from *PC*, at this point I would be following the structure of the church triumphant, in which I merge myself with an institution I believe has direct access to some sort of objective truth.

If instead of this I wanted to follow the example set by Kierkegaard's discussion of the age of revolution and the church militant, I would have to acknowledge that any set of relationships is always fractured with the anxiety of possibility. I can never simply relate to an individual in a direct and final way and in the same sense I can never relate to a group or collective in a direct and final way. To give one example, I can never simply love someone in a direct and complete manner. When I pledge my love for another individual I am simply inaugurating a process with no end in sight, as it is only through the continued renegotiation of the activity of loving the other person that I continue to be engaged in the process of loving. Anxiety is at the heart of this example, as I will be aware that at any moment it is possible that I could fail to love this person adequately and at the same time, that at any moment they could betray my love. Thus a certain sort of subjectivity fidelity, or faith, is necessary to continue this process.

To move to the social level we can think about a group of individuals engaged in a political project. The ramifications of this fractured dialectic are that reality and any project we attempt to actualize in reality can never be completely realized. Thus, to be a part of a political project means to exist within the anxiety and tension of failure, betrayal and renegotiation. My relation to a political

aim must be mediated by the ever-present possibility of contingency or change so I can thus never believe myself or the collective that I am participating to be in possession of any sort of final truth. This means that the work of the political, just like the work of becoming a self of participating in a relationship, can never be completed and instead requires that I am constantly reaffirming a commitment to a particular project as I/we aim at actualizing an ideal into reality.

To merge the examples of an individual relation and a relation to a collective, it is worth considering what sort of relation I can have to the other individuals who are also members of the collective political subject. While some figures, as I will show in the next chapter, theorize the collective subject as signifying the loss of individual subjectivity when one joins the collective, Kierkegaard gives us a way to theorize properly relational subjects who are capable of participating in what we could call a group subject while at the same time remaining in the state of tension characteristic of the freedom and anxiety fundamental to these sorts of relations.

5: The Fractured Dialectic in Recent European Materialism

5.0 Introduction

Thus far in this thesis I have discussed the philosophical and systematic backdrop upon which much of my interpretation of the writing of Søren Kierkegaard rests and have subsequently utilized this backdrop to outline: (I) a systematic interpretation of Kierkegaard's thought which identifies an ontological core to his project, (II) builds upon this ontology to outline an anthropology and theory of subjectivity and (III) finally builds upon this ontology and anthropology to develop a political ontology. At this point I will move on to discuss a philosophical perspective that has emerged in the wake of Kierkegaard and 19th century idealism; contemporary European materialism. In particular, I will focus on a particular strand of contemporary materialism that seems to implicitly (and at times explicitly) build upon the ontological, anthropological and political trajectory that I have previously outlined via my reading of Kierkegaard. While there are a number of theoretical developments that could be placed under the umbrella term 'contemporary European materialism', I will here focus particularly on the systematic approach of transcendental materialism, a theory of materialism most recently and clearly outlined in the work of Adrian Johnston, Slavoj Žižek and Catherine Malabou. While these figures may best represent the most current attempts to articulate a rigorously transcendental materialism (a theory which I briefly outlined in chapter three), I will here contend that the inaugural 'moment' of this philosophical sensibility can be most clearly located in the later work of Jean-Paul Sartre, primarily in his materialist masterpiece *The Critique of Dialectical Reason Vol. 1*. After an analysis of Sartre's materialist period and the manner in which this shift in his philosophical outlook remains in line with the ontological and political reading of Kierkegaard outlined thus far in this thesis, I will shift to an analysis of the materialist philosophy of Alain Badiou.

5.1 Sartre's Materialism

While Sartre is often regarded as the father of modern existentialist philosophy, my concern here will lie wholly with his materialist project. This may seem odd in the context of a thesis which aims to use a re-contextualization of the work of Kierkegaard to offer a critical approach to contemporary materialism as a majority of the secondary literature exploring the relationship between Sartre and Kierkegaard focuses on Sartre's earlier phenomenological work; but contra this tradition I will here argue that once approached through the ontological lens of idealism, Sartre's later materialist project bears a much deeper similarity to the underlying systematic structure of Kierkegaard's project than his earlier phenomenological project.¹⁸⁴ Along with this, I will contend that Sartre represents a sort of pivot point in the history of 20th century European philosophy as his work represents both a high point in existential-phenomenology and in post-Marxist materialism. As I will show, Sartre develops a theoretical apparatus that aims to bridge the gap between a Kierkegaardian emphasis on subjectivity and a Marxist emphasis on the manner in which material conditions shape the historical activity of collective humanity.

Because Sartre is serving a crucial role in this thesis by providing a bridge between post-idealist philosophy and contemporary materialism, I will briefly outline the historical relation between Sartre and Kierkegaard for the sake of providing a solid foundation for the following theoretical argument. This will also serve the place of re-situating the influence of Kierkegaard on Sartre to show the way in which this engagement was still shaping his thought after his materialist turn.

While there has been much written which explores the influence of Kierkegaard's writings on the philosophical work of Jean-Paul Sartre, these secondary works have dealt almost exclusively with the role Kierkegaard plays in Sartre's pre-war phenomenological and psychological work, primarily

¹⁸⁴ Here I am thinking of *Transcendence of the Ego* and *Being and Nothingness*

as seen in his first great work, *Being and Nothingness*.¹⁸⁵ While the influence of Kierkegaard on the phenomenological and psychological work of Sartre has been explored in a number of texts,¹⁸⁶ I will here focus on the influence of Kierkegaard in Sartre's post-war period in which he developed a materialist political philosophy, which is marked by his second great work, *Critique of Dialectical Reason Vol. 1*. While Kierkegaard's name only appears once in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*,¹⁸⁷ Sartre's most extensive explicit engagements with Kierkegaard take place on either side of this text. The first comes in Sartre's essay *Search for a Method*,¹⁸⁸ which was originally written as an article for a Hungarian journal in 1957, and then printed in Sartre's journal *Les temps modernes* and later published as the introduction to the French edition of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.¹⁸⁹ In this work Sartre briefly charts out the shift in his philosophical approach by explicating the shifts he sees in both Kierkegaard and Marx's responses to Hegel. The second, which was published after *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, is a conference presentation entitled 'Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal', which was presented at a UNESCO conference during 1964 in Paris entitled *Kierkegaard Vivant*.¹⁹⁰ This is Sartre's lengthiest explicit engagement with Kierkegaard and while not overtly political or ontological in nature, Sartre highlights a few particular aspects of Kierkegaard's thought that seem to parallel some of the key theoretical developments which appear in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

In the period separating *Being and Nothingness* from *Critique of Dialectical Reason* there is a dramatic shift in Sartre's philosophical concerns; in simple terms, this shift could be regarded as a transition from a concern with individual and interior experience, to a focus on exterior and social

¹⁸⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, (New York: Citadel Press, 1956).

¹⁸⁶ See Manuela Hackel, 'Jean-Paul Sartre: Kierkegaard's Influence on His Theory of Nothingness,' *Kierkegaard's International Reception, Kierkegaard's Influence on Existentialism*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Aldershot: Ashgate Forthcoming (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, and Resources*, vol. 9).

¹⁸⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: New Left Books 1976), pp. 17-18n6.

¹⁸⁸ Sartre, 'Questions de methode,' *Les temps modernes*, no. 139 (September) 1957, pp. 338-417; no. 140 (October), 1957, pp. 658-98.

¹⁸⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*

¹⁹⁰ *Kierkegaard Vivant*, Paris: Gallimard 1966. (English translation: 'Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal', trans. John Matthews, London: New Left Books, 1974)

experience. Whereas the individual subject in Sartre's early philosophical work was founded by its relation to a fundamental ontological lack, in his later work Sartre shifts to a material account of lack, scarcity, which characterizes the fundamental inconsistency between man and matter. To characterize this transition in even more obvious terms, we could say, as Sartre himself does in *Search for a Method*, that this transition is one from existentialism to Marxism.

In an interview conducted in 1969, Sartre was asked to describe the relationship between his early and late works, and during the interview Sartre recalls himself writing that: "Whatever his circumstances, and wherever the site, a man is always free to be a traitor or not..."¹⁹¹ After recounting this quotation, Sartre tells the interviewer that: "When I read this, I said to myself: it's incredible, I actually believed that!"¹⁹²

Whereas the freedom of *Being and Nothingness* is an ontological and nearly limitless freedom, the experience of a post-World War II Europe left Sartre with a realization that his earlier view was remarkably naive in light of the world's socio-political tragedies. Rather than simply acknowledging the contingent facticity of place of birth, or the class which one is born into, in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* Sartre relies on his newfound ally, Marx, to acknowledge the concrete social, political, and productive forces which can place concrete limits on the freedom of individuals. Along with this, Sartre introduces another new concept, the practio-inert, which allows him to further analyze the limits placed on freedom. The practico-inert is the name for the limit placed on human freedom by the material remnants of previous human praxis now inscribed into matter itself.¹⁹³ In this sense even the human work of past generations can limit the potential and success of living human praxis. Sartre's socio-political project can in many ways be seen as an exploration of the possibility of novel

¹⁹¹ Sartre, 'The Itinerary of a Thought', New Left Review no. 58 republished in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, London: New Left Books 1974, pp. 33-34.

¹⁹² Sartre, 'The Itinerary of a Thought', p. 34.

¹⁹³ An interesting parallel could be drawn between the idea of practico-inert and the concept of objective anxiety that I discussed in chapter two.

and collective human praxis in light of the seemingly determined limits placed on humanity by both material scarcity and by the work of past human praxis inscribed in the practio-inert.

In light of what may seem like an abandonment of his earlier project, many will be unsurprised to hear that there is but one passing footnote reference to Kierkegaard in Sartre's sprawling and ultimately unfinished two-volume *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.¹⁹⁴ What may be surprising, however, is the fact that Sartre's two most extended explicit engagements with Kierkegaard take place during his later political, or Marxist, period of his work. One of these pieces, *Search for a Method*, later served as the introduction to the French edition of *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, and the other essay, "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," was presented in 1964, well into Sartre's Marxist period. While both engagements include substantial reference to Kierkegaard in general, they include limited explicit textual references, which can leave one wondering if Sartre had in fact interacted in much depth with Kierkegaard's writings, or if Kierkegaard served to represent a certain philosophical position for Sartre.

A majority of the engagement with Kierkegaard in *Search for a Method* takes place in the opening chapter, "Marxism and Existentialism." This chapter opens with a discussion of Hegel, who Sartre sees as being the starting point for both Marxism and existentialism. Never one to avoid polemic, Sartre does not keep the reader waiting to find out which school of thought he intends to side with; only a few pages in Sartre lets us know that Marxism is the only philosophy of our time and that "A so called 'going beyond' Marxism will be at worst only a return to pre-Marxism."¹⁹⁵ After this early affirmation of Marxism, Sartre then backs up a bit to discuss Kierkegaard, specifically in the context of his reaction to Hegelian totalization. As Sartre sees it, Kierkegaard's primary opposition to the Hegelian system lies in his insistence that "the existing man cannot be assimilated

¹⁹⁴ Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*

¹⁹⁵ Sartre, *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, p. 17; *Search for a Method*, p. 7.

by a system of ideas.”¹⁹⁶ For Sartre, this is what is worth holding onto in the work of Kierkegaard, this emphasis on “pure unique subjectivity” which cannot merely be explained as a moment in the unfolding of the historical system. This said, Sartre still acknowledges that Kierkegaard’s “anti-Hegelian” project could only emerge “within a cultural field entirely dominated by Hegelianism.”¹⁹⁷

He goes on to emphasize the particularly human and affective aspects of the subject in Kierkegaard, noting, “Kierkegaard is right: grief, need, passion, the pain of men, are brute realities which can be neither surpassed nor changed by knowledge.”¹⁹⁸ The point here for Sartre is that contra-Hegelianism, ideas do not change men, but rather, a passionate response to a need produced by a particular situation is what has the capacity to actualize change in an individual. Sartre goes on to argue, “Knowing the cause of a passion is not enough to overcome it; one must live it, one must oppose other passions to it, one must combat it tenaciously, in short one must “work oneself over.”¹⁹⁹ Shortly after this passage Sartre then shifts the focus of his discussion back to Marx:

It is striking that Marxism addresses the same reproach to Hegel though from quite another point of view. For Marx, indeed, Hegel has confused objectification, the simple externalization of man in the universe, with the alienation which turns his externalization back against man. Taken by itself-Marx emphasizes this again and again-objectification would be an opening out; it would allow man, who produces and reproduces his life without ceasing and who transforms himself by changing nature, to ‘contemplate himself in a world which he has created.’²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ Sartre, *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, p. 19; *Search for a Method*, p. 10.

¹⁹⁷ Sartre, *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, p. 19; *Search for a Method*, p. 11.

¹⁹⁸ Sartre, *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, pp. 19-20; *Search for a Method*, p. 12.

¹⁹⁹ Sartre, *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, p. 20; *Search for a Method*, p. 12-3.

²⁰⁰ Sartre, *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, p. 20; *Search for a Method*, p. 13.

Here Sartre begins to spell out the main argument of this chapter and the one that in many ways defines his materialist authorship. Sartre is providing a reading of Marx that emphasizes the role of the subjective, and he thus claims, “Marx puts priority of action over knowledge.”²⁰¹ Sartre sees Marx as placing an emphasis on action and the subjective into Hegelian objective knowledge. Later on the same page we see Sartre arguing that Marx is thus able to take the best aspects of both Hegel and Kierkegaard and turn this into a new philosophical and political system: “Thus Marx, rather than Kierkegaard or Hegel, is right, since he asserts with Kierkegaard the specificity of human *existence* and, along with Hegel, takes the concrete man in his objective reality.”²⁰² At this point we see that if it was Kierkegaard who seemed to define much of the overall project of Sartre’s existential philosophy, it is undoubtedly Marx who will be the philosopher informing Sartre’s materialist and political thought. It is also important to note here that Sartre avoids completely abandoning Hegel or Kierkegaard by making the point that the difference between their thought is not a fundamental one, but rather a matter of standpoint or perspective. Sartre thus sees Marx as the figure in which Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the singular individual and Hegel’s emphasis on the absolute idea’s progression towards the whole is consummated into a single philosophy.

Kierkegaard does not play a major role in *Search for a Method* after this opening chapter, and in the text this book would later serve to introduce, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, he fails to play any substantial or explicit role. But it is clear that the Marx who appears throughout the rest of Sartre’s political writings is one whom he sees to be carrying out a very Kierkegaardian project.

Sartre’s second major interaction with Kierkegaard in his post-war period is the lecture “Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal.” While in many ways this lecture lacks substantial engagement with the social and political aspects of his later philosophy, the version of Kierkegaard Sartre develops in the lecture is one that seems to be in agreement with much of Sartre’s project as laid out

²⁰¹ Sartre, *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, p. 21; *Search for a Method*, p. 14.

²⁰² Sartre, *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, p. 21; *Search for a Method*, p. 14.

in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Because of this, I will make some brief remarks on the lecture itself, and then highlight the implications of this reading of Kierkegaard for our purpose of examining his influence on Sartre's materialist and political philosophy.

Much like the argument Sartre presents in the "Existentialism and Marxism" chapter of *Search for a Method*, he here emphasizes the role passion and lived experience play in allowing Kierkegaard to avoid being merely a historical moment in the system, and thus, Sartre says that Kierkegaard is a "survivor of the system and one of its prophets."²⁰³ He goes on to exemplify that rather than a Hegelian account of the development of temporality in which philosophy is placed at the end of history and has come into being through retrospective knowledge, Kierkegaard on the contrary conceives of history as never 'finished' in this sense and infinitely open rather than a finished totality. For Kierkegaard, according to Sartre, rather than denying the possibility of a beginning, there is always the possibility of a new beginning that is *lived*.²⁰⁴ From here Sartre goes on to explain that for Kierkegaard the existing thinker is always born into a certain "set of socio-economic, cultural, moral, religious, and other relations."²⁰⁵ These pre-determined relations subsequently put limits on the individual's freedom, but as Sartre develops his thought in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, these limits create needs which are the very things that enable the subject to utilize her freedom in actualizing a new possibility. Describing this in Kierkegaardian terms, Sartre states, "the Paradox, for him, is the fact that we discover the absolute in the relative."²⁰⁶

²⁰³ Sartre, 'Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal' in *Between Existentialism and Marxism* trans. John Matthews (London: New Left Books, 1974), p.144.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p.153.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., p.154.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p.155.

Sartre then argues that because Adam temporalizes himself by sin, or in secular terms through an act of free choice, “that the foundation of History is freedom in *each man*.”²⁰⁷ Sartre is once again utilizing Kierkegaard’s work to emphasize the theory of history he sets out in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. It is of utter importance for Sartre’s political project that historical circumstances do not constrain the freedom of individuals, but rather that we “escape history to the extent that we make it.”²⁰⁸ According to Sartre’s political project, the need we encounter in history is the very lack that allows freedom to move beyond history by creating new situations. In this lecture, Sartre wants to read Kierkegaard as holding to a similar theory of the role of the individual in history.

Moving forward, Sartre once again provides a reading of Kierkegaard that places him at odds with what he sees as the Hegelian conception of a totalizing historical process, noting that “every enterprise, even one brought to a triumphant conclusion, remains a *failure*, that is to say an incompleteness to be completed. It lives on because it is open.”²⁰⁹ This once again follows Sartre’s insistence in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* that a new historical sequence inaugurated by a pledged-group always becomes an institution and collapses back into seriality, meaning that any subjective enterprise will inevitably fail, and the process must once again recommence. In Sartre’s political philosophy, there is no such thing as Fukuyama’s “end of history.”²¹⁰ The question obviously remains as to whether or not Sartre is taking an inward and subjective category in Kierkegaard and then turning it into a historical and political category.

When Sartre reaches the end of this lecture he finally returns to the reading of Kierkegaard we previously encountered in the *Search for a Method*. He closes the lecture stating, “Kierkegaard and Marx: these living-dead men condition our anchorage and institute themselves, now vanished, as our

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p.161.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p.161.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 168.

²¹⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Harper 1993.

future, as the tasks that await us.”²¹¹ While we see that Sartre obviously still places philosophical importance on the work of Kierkegaard, it is equally clear that his overall project of philosophically considering political and historical sequences is one he considers to be staunchly Marxist and Kierkegaard seems to merely re-emphasize an emphasis on freedom and openness he already believes to be present in Marx’s thought itself.

Much of what he does here is recount his position on history and the importance of the individual subject as found in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* through a Kierkegaardian lens and at the end, goes back to pairing Kierkegaard with Marx and arguing that through these two men we can think the future of philosophy. The social and political importance of what Sartre does here is emphasizing the openness of the future to social and political projects, and the contingency of existing historical situations. Along with this, he lets us know that no process is ever truly complete, and in a sense, every social-political project remains a failure to be completed by another subject or group.²¹²

Overall, it seems as if the importance of Kierkegaard to Sartre’s social-political thought is that he reminds us that we cannot dissolve the subject into the historical process and that the place of the subjective is the paradox which resists being taken up into an historical process and from the position of the subject one can exploit the openness and incompleteness of past historical processes to do something new. This allows Sartre to theorize the emergence of new political situations inaugurated by the scarcity experienced by individuals. Now that the more historical aspects of the influence of Kierkegaard’s thought on Sartre have been outlined in detail, I would like to now look at the core project of his materialist masterpiece, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. This will be important as I would like to both argue that this text already embodies many elements of the fractured dialectic

²¹¹ Sartre, ‘Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal’, p. 169.

²¹² Sartre, ‘Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal’, p. 168.

that I have been outlining and because this text sets up much of the agenda for contemporary French materialism, and pre-figures the project of another crucial figure for this study, Alain Badiou

5.2 Critique of Dialectical Reason

I will now outline the general project of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, focusing primarily on the fundamental role played by scarcity in providing the material grounds for freedom and the genesis of the group-subject (or fused group). Attention will be given to Sartre's general ontological structure, which differs from the structure of consciousness in his early works far less than is usually assumed.

Finally I will briefly return to Kierkegaard and argue that rather than abandoning him, Sartre continues to rely on the ontological structure I have attempted to explicate throughout this study. Rather than simply arguing, as one rightly could, that Sartre's later project is in many ways a materialization of Kierkegaard's religious ontology, I will instead argue that Kierkegaard's later work (which Sartre does not seem to have read) already provides an account of the social and of group-subjectivity which pre-figure Sartre by over a century. A parallel will be drawn between Kierkegaard's notion of the church-militant and Sartre's militant group to exemplify how they both operate within the same fundamental ontological structure developed in what I have been referring to as Kierkegaard's fractured dialectic.

Whereas I have previously outlined the concept of ontological ground, or more precisely the lack of a ground, which creates the possibility for an inward freedom for consciousness in Kierkegaard's *CA*, I will now briefly outline Sartre's project of determining the grounds and conditions of collective (and social) freedom in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. To do this I will make some brief remarks on Sartre's later project as a whole, focusing in particular on Sartre's conception

of scarcity as the factor which enables both antagonism between humans and the possibility of a positive relation between humans, as well as the progression of the subject-group in the *Critique*.²¹³

In Volume 1 of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* Sartre begins a critical discussion in which he differentiates his developing dialectical project from that of Marx, stating:

Marxism's tendency to skip the abstract discussion of human relations and jump immediately to an analysis situated within the world of productive forces puts it at the danger of unwittingly supporting the atomism of liberalism and of analytical rationality.²¹⁴

On the same page Sartre goes on, paraphrasing the early Marx, to note the dialectical relationship between men and history:

My **formalism**, which is inspired by that of Marx, consists simply in recognizing that men make History to precisely the extent that it makes them. This means that relations between men are always the dialectical consequence of their activity to precisely the extent that they arise as a **transcendence** of dominating and institutionalized human relations.²¹⁵

²¹³ In a sense we can see a clear relation between Sartre using scarcity as a concept that creates the conditions for both antagonism and positive social relation, and the manner in which Kierkegaard's uses contradiction (and anxiety) as both a negative and a potentially positive category.

²¹⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critical of Dialectical Reason Vol. 1* (London: Verso, 2004) p. 97. This 'atomism of liberalism' and 'analytic rationality' reminds one of Kierkegaard's discussions of the 'leveling' and 'numeric' tendencies of the politics of reflection in 'The Present Age' which I outlined in the previous chapter.

²¹⁵ Ibid. It is worth mentioning Sartre's use of the term 'transcendence' in this context, as it can help make sense of some of the comments I made in chapter three regarding a contemporary (and materialist) reading of Kierkegaard's use of the concept. Here Sartre clearly has no underlying theological agenda in the use of this term, he is simply pointing out the possibility of human activity to 'transcend' a set of historical and material conditions which can appear to be determined/absolute. This 'transcendence' arises as the product of human activity attempting to overcome material and historical contradiction.

Sartre's point, simply stated, is that human relations are *real* and not merely the determined product of the totalizing force of history. For Sartre, all human relations are given as the dialectical consequence of praxis²¹⁶ and are inter-individual structures which *actually* exist at every moment of history and rather than signifying a lack of relation, isolation is nothing more than a particular aspect (or, moment) of these relations.²¹⁷ In opposition to those who have theorized the human as simply an atom of the totality, Sartre argues that human reality "is rather a changing indefinite dispersal of reciprocities."²¹⁸

While Sartre did have an account of the material limitations of human freedom in *Being and Nothingness*, this facticity had much more to do with general conditions such as time, place, language, and previous choices which all define our present situation. Instead of attempting to resuscitate this concept for dialectical use in the *Critique*, Sartre abandons this term and relates the primary constraints on human freedom to *situation* and *scarcity*.

Before moving to a direct discussion of this notion of scarcity, we must first expand our discussion of relation and reciprocity in the *Critique*. While in one sense, it is clear that Sartre wants to hold onto the reciprocal nature of humanity and reality in a positive and praxis-oriented sense, he also notes the links between reciprocity, exploitation and repression.²¹⁹ Because each human is part of a relational world filled with other humans, Sartre notes, "It is important to see in this how each of them exists, or *produces his being*, in the presence of the other and in the human world."²²⁰

Reciprocity is thus the a priori condition of all human action and relation, whether this is a praxis that affirms the humanity of the other, or one that seeks to de-humanize the other for the sake of repression and domination. Following this, Sartre notes "the quality of being a *man* does not exist as

²¹⁶ Ibid., p. 98.

²¹⁷ Ibid., p. 99.

²¹⁸ Ibid., p. 100. Thus reality *is* relational in its structure for Sartre.

²¹⁹ Ibid., p. 109. This is the title of Book 1, Section 3.

²²⁰ Ibid.

such,”²²¹ one is either recognized as man and recognizes the other as man, or he does not. Often the de-humanization of man is masked in an act that supposedly serves to affirm the freedom and humanity of this individual. Sartre uses the example of the capitalist purchasing labor based on a contract. Formally, this is a reciprocal relationship, a free exchange between two men (the capitalist and the laborer) who each recognize the freedom of the other. But as Sartre notes, this relation is not one of freedom, as “one of them pretends not to notice that the other is forced by the constraint of needs to sell himself as a material object.”²²² The employer, however, gets to keep a clean conscience about this oppressive transaction as he recognizes the complete freedom of the laborer in the moment of exchange.

As Sartre acutely points out, “absolute respect for the freedom of the property-less is the best way of leaving him at a mercy of material constraints, at the moment of the contract.”²²³ Thus, while an actual recognition of the freedom and humanity of the other can lead to a liberating praxis, this recognition of a ‘freedom without humanity’ simply serves to perpetuate the conditions that lead to this oppression in the first place.

Clearly, it can be seen that reciprocity can be just as much a destructive as a constructive force, because “in order to *treat man like a dog*, one must first recognize him as a man.”²²⁴ This is the conclusion Sartre comes to when discussing the reciprocal relations between slave-owner and slave, in which by keeping slaves from becoming Christians and thus attempting to keep them as sub-humans, they were already recognizing that they were men, as they were acknowledging a capacity for them to acquire this religious belief that for them signified humanity (and a certain form of subjectivity). Thus, “reciprocity [...] does not save man from men.”²²⁵

²²¹ Ibid., p. 110.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid., p. 111.

²²⁵ Ibid.

Much of what creates this distinction between good and bad reciprocity is the sort of collective praxis, or project, towards which one is working. Sartre provides a description of this process worth quoting at length:

But man is a material being set in a material world; he wants to change the world which crushes him, that is, to act on the world of materiality through the mediation of matter and hence to change himself. His constant search for a different arrangement of the universe, and a different statute for man; and in terms of this new order he is able to define himself as the Other whom he will become [...] In other words, man as the future of man is the regulative schema of every undertaking.²²⁶

What is at stake is the type of arrangement, or new order, one is working towards; and more importantly, the way in which man will be defined and recognized within this order. One could envision a new order in which all men were inherently equal and thus one man would be able to define himself as all men and vice versa. Conversely, one could also envision a future project in which he and others fitting his set of criteria are human, while many others are not. The important point here is that each human undertaking carries with it an implicit (and sometimes explicit) definition of what, or whom, gets to be considered man and have the rights and possibilities which come along with this recognition. Thus Sartre notes, “In this way, reciprocity can be either positive or negative.”²²⁷ In the first case, one can make themselves the means within the project of the other, or two may share the same projected end and thus strive for the same ends collectively. On the other hand, each can refuse to serve the end of the other and instead turns others into the

²²⁶ Ibid., p. 112. Thus, man projects his potential future as a possibility, and this possibility is what orients man’s activity in their present state. This once again relates back to the Kierkegaardian political-ontology discussed in the previous chapter.

²²⁷ Ibid., p. 113.

instruments of his projected end. This situation, in which everyone is reduced to an instrumental materiality, is *struggle*. More importantly for Sartre is that “the origin of struggle always lies, in fact, in some concrete antagonism whose material condition is *scarcity*.”²²⁸

For Sartre “the whole of human development, at least up to now, has been a bitter struggle against scarcity.”²²⁹ History, culture, language, production and political organization can all be traced back to this one universal condition of material existence. The discussion of scarcity leads Sartre into some of his most stark socio-political writing, noting things like “the fact is that after thousands of years of History, three quarters of the world’s population are undernourished.”²³⁰ At this point it becomes painfully clear that Sartre is attempting to make philosophy face up to the harsh truths of material existence and in a sense, it can be argued that much of this text can be read as a personal struggle to see if philosophy has any practical use to a world faced with war, genocide and famine.

Rather than simply highlight the dark side of scarcity, however, Sartre is quick to note that scarcity is not a wholly negative aspect of materiality. According to Sartre, scarcity is a “fundamental relation of our history and a contingent determination of our univocal relation to materiality”, as well as the “the basis of the possibility of human history.”²³¹ As well as this, scarcity can also be seen as the fundamental relation of the individual to the environment, as the environment is a ready-constituted practical field that relates all humanity to collective structures.²³² This aspect of materiality thus signifies both the possibility of destruction and of creation and according to Sartre, “this first aspect of scarcity can condition the unity of the group, in that the group, taken collectively, may organize itself to react collectively.”²³³

²²⁸ Ibid., p. 113.

²²⁹ Ibid., p. 123.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid., p. 125.

²³² Ibid., p. 127.

²³³ Ibid.

Scarcity, which basically signifies to the human that ‘there is not enough for everyone’, is what creates the primary problems which haunt humanity. It is scarcity which leads the employer to put the worker in oppressive conditions and which leads one man to lord himself over another for the sake of domination and survival. But while scarcity can lead to negative and destructive activity, it also leads to situations in which humans find themselves caught up in projects created by scarcity and striving towards the same goal. In these situations, individual praxis can be transformed into group praxis and the concerns of the one can be recognized as the concerns of the many. Thus while scarcity is the very thing which can rip humanity apart and lead one man to regard another as non-human, it is also this very force which brings human beings together and leads them to re-define humanity and strive towards the creation of a new present in which this new definition will re-order society.

As Sartre points out, the situation created by scarcity is one that simply says that “there is not enough for everybody”²³⁴ and that subsequently enables society to:

Discreetly select[s] its dead simply by distributing items of expenditure in a particular way, and which, at its deepest foundations, is already in itself a choice of who is well provide for and who will go hungry.²³⁵

Sartre calls this problem *surplus population* and notes that this product of scarcity is what ends up defining a nation or group. This is what leads man to exist for another man as non-human, or as Sartre says, as an alien species.²³⁶ This is because when resources are limited, and society does not have enough for all to survive, any other is simply an alien who is capable of using up the resources

²³⁴ Ibid., p. 128.

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 129.

²³⁶ Ibid., p. 130.

that I need to survive. This means that, “the mere existence of everyone is defined by scarcity as the constant danger of non-existence both for another and for everyone.”²³⁷

Scarcity leads to need, which for Sartre is the “first totalizing relation between material being, man, and the material ensemble of which he is a part.”²³⁸ This need, which is a negation of the negation, expresses itself as a fundamental lack and causes man to live in the future of his own possibility and the possibility of his future praxis. This need and subsequent lack (which both emerge from the fundamental condition of scarcity) is the very thing that leads to the possibility of the group-subject.²³⁹ As Sartre sees it, this condition of scarcity is not just the fundamental condition that leads to oppression and violence, but also equally the condition that enables freedom and collective action as the negation of this lack. For Sartre:

[...] lack appears through function [and] finally need posits negation by its very existence in that it is itself an initial negation of lack. In short, the intelligibility of the negative as a structure of being can be made manifest only in connection with a developing process of totalisation.²⁴⁰

This concept of scarcity also informs Sartre’s concept of history, as “the whole of human development [...] has been a bitter struggle against scarcity.”²⁴¹ For Sartre, it is this inconsistency between man and matter that has created the space for antagonism and cooperation, freedom and oppression, violent exclusion and radical inclusion. I will briefly recount one of Sartre’s most used

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 80.

²³⁹ Ibid., p. 83.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 85.

²⁴¹ Ibid., p. 123.

examples from the *Critique* to exemplify how scarcity creates the space for emergence of a group-subject.

The example used by Sartre is a queue of individuals waiting for a bus. Most of the individuals waiting for the bus pay no mind to the others in the queue, as they are primarily concerned with their current project of getting on the bus and travelling to their desired destination. At this stage everyone relates to the bus, but not to the others with them in the queue. This is what Sartre refers to as a *serial group*. The dynamic of this relationship and mode of existence is predicated on a fundamental scarcity, which is the amount of places available on the bus in relation to the number of individuals in the queue. They know that not everyone will make it on the bus, so rather than relating to the other as someone who is a human projecting himself towards a similar project, they are instead seen as an enemy, as someone who stands in the way of their particular projected goal. At the point of seriality the other is seen as an enemy who is attempting to take a scarce resource that one would rather have for himself. As Thomas Flynn has noted, the bus serves as a collective object that serves as an index of separation that keeps individuals apart on the pretext of their unification.²⁴² This sort of arithmetic reasoning presents each element, or member, of a series as possessing the same properties and leads to a sort of leveling in which each element of the series is equally interchangeable with any other. Sartre notes that at this point there is nothing explicitly human about this mode of relation.

Next Sartre shows us what happens if the bus does not show up, or consistently shows up late. A problem arises and this problem affects all members of the series equally. Because of this problem those in the queue start talking to each other, sharing their concerns about the problems with the buses and through this they recognize that they share the same fundamental need. Eventually, they could come to a shared project based on this problem and subsequently plan a

²⁴² Thomas Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism: The Test Case of Collective Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 98.

course of collective action to attempt to change, or re-configure, this situation. At this point the individuals in the group come together around a collective praxis and they make a transition from being a serial group to a fused group, or collective.

When the group forms in this way Sartre claims that we see the 'sudden resurrection of freedom' and the emergence of a group subject which projects itself into the future as a re-configuration of its current state of human existence. For Sartre this praxis is the only real unity of the fused group.²⁴³ Later in the text he describes the fused group by noting that while “the subject is plural, the action is singular.”²⁴⁴

While much more could be said about this, I want to quickly mention one more aspect of Sartre's theory of group formation that will help us connect this work back to our discussion of Kierkegaard. For Sartre, the fused group (or group-in-fusion) is not the last step of the formation of group subjectivity, often after the fused-group becomes a collective body formed around a collective and unifying praxis, it becomes an institution. In simple terms, when the collective becomes an institution, it is no longer a free collective body working in a collective praxis around a shared problem, but instead becomes a closed and bureaucratic body seeking to keep things the way they are. Rather than existing within the constant terror of a collective, in which freedom could always re-emerge around a new shared project and collective orientation, the institution attempts to deny this terrifying freedom and establish a stagnant order. At this point, Sartre notes that the institution brings this process full circle and causes humanity to regress to being a serial group once again, with no sense of shared freedom or collective praxis. It is worth noting the sort of pessimism that still seems to haunt Sartre's project at this point. While he provides a formal structure to explain how the condition of material scarcity creates the conditions for individuals to actualize their collective humanity through being fused into a group aiming at accomplishing a particular project, this aim to

²⁴³ Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, p. 418.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 506.

transcend a particular material scarcity can and usually does lead back to an immanent state in which things just ‘are’ this way. In this sense Sartre is fairly clear when he implies that even if a fused-group momentarily embodies a novel surge of freedom which changes material conditions, this inevitably leads back to the foundation of a new state which leads to the return of serial relations amongst individuals. Sartre does not think a revolutionary process will ever lead to anything other than a new state.

5.3 Kierkegaard and Sartre

Now that the major conceptual aspects of Sartre’s late philosophy and political project have been outlined, I would like to analyze the way in which this project not only allows us to re-consider the manner in which Kierkegaard can be seen as not only pre-figuring much of this later Marxist project but also allows us to better imagine what a materialist re-interpretation of Kierkegaard would look like in terms of politics and subjectivity. To highlight both of these aspects I would like to briefly consider Sartre’s project as it relates to my previous interpretive reading of Kierkegaard’s *CA* as well as the theory of group subjectivity I pointed out in Kierkegaard’s *PC*. To begin with, however, I would like to focus on a comment made by David Kangas regarding the positive and negative aspects of Kierkegaard’s theory of anxiety:

Anxiety over a further descent into evil, which at bottom is anxiety over the future, is a position that, in its totality, stands within the good. The recovering gambling addict will not pass a casino without anxiety, and that very anxiety expresses a good will. The demonic formation, on the other hand, embraces the *Afgrund* of possibility as if it were a mere extension of the self – as if the possibility of possibility were *its* possibility.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ Kangas, *Kierkegaard’s Instant*, p. 178.

The issue Kangas is highlighting in this passage, the distinction Kierkegaard develops between the good and the demonic, seems to pre-figure one of the most important aspects of the development of group subjectivity that I highlighted in the previous section on Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. For Kierkegaard, one does not lose anxiety after their descent into the abyss [*Afgrund*] and an embrace of absolute and contingent freedom. Instead, anxiety is embraced as a constant state, one that serves as a reminder of the terrifying abyss, un-constrained by the will of the subject, which is the very condition of freedom (CA 112). The demonic, which Kierkegaard defines as 'un-freedom that wants to close itself off', is characterized by a subject which believes the infinite possibility of freedom is contained within itself and who wants to close itself off from the contingency of the future. In the demonic, one attempts to close off the possibility of any and all alterity, otherness or novelty.

There is a similar, albeit social, structure at work in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. In this work Sartre maps out the material conditions that create the space for the genesis of the collective-subject, or group. In a structure similar to Kierkegaard's ontology of the self, there is a fundamental lack in a situation that creates a sort of social anxiety leading to a series of individuals coming together around a common cause, or praxis. This subject is one of action and one fuelled by both freedom and anxiety. I pointed out in the last section that Sartre develops a crucial distinction between a collective and an institution. In Kierkegaardian terms, the collective group is always acting in the anxiety of contingency and possibility, attempting to maintain a critical praxis that maintains a constant relation to this fundamental condition of existence. An institution, on the other hand, considers itself as closed off from the externality of anxiety and contingency and instead encloses itself and considers its project as fundamentally complete and finalized.

We can now clearly see that the collective group exhibits the anxiety that Kierkegaard previously attributed to the good will, as it is always aware of the possibility of things being otherwise and maintains a healthy relation to the anxiety coming from a relation to the abyss of freedom. Institutions, on the other hand, seem to be much more closely related to Kierkegaard's definition of the demonic as "in-closed-ness" (*CA* 118), which is exhibited in anxiety about the good, or sudden. If we grant this equivocation between Kierkegaard's conception of the good and of the instant, or event, we can see that Sartre's institution is closed off from the possibility of something like the instant from radically changing the truth defining the praxis and orientation of those engaged in a particular situation.

We have already noted a similar social structure in Kierkegaard's own work. In *PC* Kierkegaard provides a distinction between the church-militant and the church-triumphant. The church militant is the one relating to the future as fundamentally open, for which truth is a process to be worked out infinitely and collectively. The church triumphant believes itself to be in possession of an absolute and objective truth and thus closes itself off to any future contingency or otherness. Here we can draw a clear parallel between Kierkegaard's account of the church-militant and church-triumphant and Sartre's notion of the collective-group and the institution, especially as at various points in the *Critique* Sartre refers to the collective group as the 'group-militant'.

Along with this we can see a parallel between Sartre's account of the group in fusion and the account of group subjectivity in Kierkegaard that I have outlined in the previous chapter, in which through relating to an orienting idea, individuals are able to properly relate to one another. In both cases, it is the existence of an external idea (or in Sartre's case, a need produced by scarcity) that enables separate individuals to participate in group-activity and transcend their capacities as individuals. In the following section I will outline the manner in which Alain Badiou takes up Sartre's formalist materialism to further develop a theory of group-subjectivity grounded in the

response to external events, but one which adds a hopefulness to Sartre's ultimately pessimistic insistence that militant collective activity will always collapse back into a new institution.

Before moving forward it is worth noting that if in one sense we see a clear parallel between Sartre's political project and the previously outlined political reading of Kierkegaard, there is a clear distinction in terms of the possibility of hope and the faithful continuance of projects which break with the logic of serial existence. For Sartre, the militant group will necessarily collapse back into an institution that returns individuals to their original state of serial existence. Sartre acknowledges the capacity of human beings to collectively work towards the creation of a new future, but is convinced that this collective creativity can only lead back to the creation of a new institution in an effort to build a wall around a particular form of truth and existence. On the other hand, for Kierkegaard, there is always hope for new modes of existence and things do not necessarily collapse back into an earlier state as they do with Sartre. As we have seen, the terror of a new state always haunts the one moving forward in a faithful mode of subjectivity.

In the following section I will outline the manner in which Alain Badiou takes up Sartre's formalist materialism to further develop a theory of group-subjectivity grounded in the response to external events. Through this analysis of Badiou's ontological project I will also offer a Kierkegaardian critique of Badiou's form of materialism.

5.4 Badiou and the Paradox of the Event

It is first worth noting the manner in which Jean-Paul Sartre's materialist period paved the way for the philosophical project of Alain Badiou. As Badiou states in his first major work, *Theory of the Subject*, his work sought to re-inscribe a theory of the subject into Marxist materialism and an intellectual landscape largely dominated by the anti-humanism of Louis Althusser and his students. In a sense, if much of pre-war French philosophy could be largely characterized by the existential

phenomenology of Jean-Paul Sartre, by the radically transitional period centering around the events of May '68, French philosophy had largely abandoned its emphasis on the abstract and limitless freedom of human consciousness and instead could be characterized by the conceptual schemas of Lacanian structuralism and Marxist materialism.²⁴⁶ As we have already seen, Sartre occupies the unique position of being firmly on both sides of this conceptual divide and in particular, his late work is an attempt to think both the determining and limiting forces of material conditions while at the same time holding onto a theory of human freedom and activity at the collective level. It is hard to think of the possibility of the emergence of the systematic ontology of Alain Badiou without the materialist project of Jean-Paul Sartre.²⁴⁷

Thus it is no surprise that in a piece in which he attempts to provide an auto-biographical account of his own philosophical development Badiou refers to Sartre as one of his three great masters, alongside Lacan and Althusser.²⁴⁸ While Althusser and Lacan are more commonly invoked for their influence on Badiou, even a cursory reading of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* makes it quite clear that Badiou's project of a materialist theory of collective subjectivity would be impossible without the groundwork laid by Sartre. If anything, it seems as if Sartre, much like Kierkegaard, has been undervalued by the collective emphasis in the history of philosophy on his 'existentialism' rather than his political and materialist project.

If in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* we see Sartre outlining his theory of dialectical materialism, Badiou modifies this in his own theory of materialism, which he refers to as *materialist dialectics*. This theory, which I will outline more formally in the following section, has arguably served as the most

²⁴⁶ There is of course another equally important line of 20th century French philosophy that can be traced back to Bergson and instead places emphasis on the manner in which vitalism and materiality could reckon with post-existential philosophy. While this tradition is important, I am focusing on what could be called 'post-Sartrean' French philosophy in the current study as it both lays the groundwork for contemporary transcendental materialism as well as embodies the structure of the 'fractured dialectic' argued for in this work.

²⁴⁷ This crucial connection has previously been noted in the work of Dr. Nina Power (Roehampton) and Dr. Brian Smith (Dundee).

²⁴⁸ Badiou, 'Philosophy as Biography', Lacanian Ink, online, http://www.lacan.com/symptom9_articles/badiou19.html

crucial point of reference to contemporary European materialism. To various extents, Badiou's materialist dialectics serve as a crucial point of both inspiration and criticism to the projects of Slavoj Žižek, Quentin Meillassoux, Adrian Johnston and Peter Hallward.²⁴⁹ Badiou's influence can also be seen in the divergence of movements and thinkers who use his system as a point of reference, as his work has become a common point of reference to both radical materialist and realist philosophers as well as to dogmatic Christian theologians.²⁵⁰

Before moving forward, it is worth noting the specific manner in which Badiou considers his philosophy to represent a certain conceptual strand of recent French philosophy. Badiou makes this claim after wagering that there is a particular French philosophical moment that takes place in the second half of the twentieth century that is equivalent in importance to classical Greek philosophy between Parmenides and Aristotle as well as to German idealism 'between Kant and Hegel, via Fichte and Schelling.' He further describes this moment in French philosophy by arguing that it is split into two opposed trajectories; on the one side a philosophy of life and 'vital interiority' which emerged in the wake of Bergson and on the other, a formal philosophy of conceptual thought and mathematization inaugurated by the work of Brunschvicq.²⁵¹ In the same essay he goes on to discuss the manner in which both orientations remain concerned with the question of the subject, and that:

[...] at issue, most fundamentally, has been the division of French philosophy between, on one side, what I would call an existential vitalism, originating with Bergson and running

²⁴⁹ See Žižek, *The Parallax View, In Defense of Lost Causes and Less Than Nothing*; Meillassoux *After Finitude* trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2009); Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009); and Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

²⁵⁰ See Hollis Phelps, *Alain Badiou: Between Theology and Anti-Theology* (Durham: Acumen, 2013); Frederiek Depoortere, *Badiou and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009).

²⁵¹ Alain Badiou, *The Adventure of French Philosophy* trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 1iii.

through Sartre, Foucault and Deleuze, and on the other a conceptual formalism, derived from Brunschvicq and continuing through Althusser and Lacan.²⁵²

Badiou thus seems to fall wholly on the later lineage of conceptual formalism, but as I will argue, in his recent work he has attempted to bridge the divide between life and formalism, particularly in relation to his developing theory of the subject.

Because the conceptual focus of this study primarily has to do with theories of ontology and subjectivity, my in-depth discussion of Badiou will be restricted to a discussion of the development of his theory of subjectivity over his major works and the conceptual modifications and problems which emerge through this development. That said, it would still make little sense to present Badiou's theory of subjectivity without giving a general outline of his overall project. While it is never a simple task to summarize the position of a figure whose systematic aims rival those of Hegel himself, I hope to provide a concise conceptual account that will provide the reader less familiar with Badiou's project an idea of his overall aims.

First and foremost, Badiou's philosophy attempts to bring the questions of truth and the subject back into the forefront of philosophical thinking. He accomplishes this task through a rigorous theorization of the *event* and its role in systematic ontology. By event Badiou means an occurrence that disrupts the state of a situation by bringing something novel into existence that cannot be comprehended or assimilated in the logical structure of that particular situation. An example of this structure, and one Badiou himself utilizes, is that of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.²⁵³ This mirrors the formal structure of the event as something seemingly impossible takes place that cannot be accounted for by the logic of the situation. For Badiou, this evental

²⁵² Ibid., p. 1ix.

²⁵³ Badiou relies on the example of Christianity, and in particular Pauline Christianity, most explicitly in his work *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

structure is what brings truth into existence and this truth is true inasmuch as it is capable of inaugurating new forms of subjectivity. To return to the example of Christ, the incarnation and resurrection, along with the existence of an individual who was both fully human and fully divine, were events that could not be adequately accounted for by either Greek or Hebrew logic and thus an entirely new form of logic (Pauline Christianity) had to come into existence to be able to retroactively account for this event. This is important for the question of subjectivity as individuals are forced to make a decision in the wake of an event: either this thing happened, or it did not. If one affirms the event and enters into the process of staying faithful to the consequences of this event, then a new subject is created. As Badiou states:

The Christian subject does not preexist the event he declares (Christ's resurrection). Thus, the extrinsic conditions of his existence of identity will be argued against. He will be required to be neither Jewish (or circumcised), nor Greek (or wise). This is the theory of discourses (there are three: the Jewish, the Greek, the new). No more than he will be required to be from this or that societal class (theory of equality before truth), or this or that sex (theory of women).²⁵⁴

To continue with the example of Christianity we can consider, as Badiou himself does, the form of subjectivity we see in the Apostle Paul. While Paul himself was not present for the actual life of Christ, he has a traumatic encounter (while he was still Saul) with the risen Christ while travelling on the road to Damascus. This encounter then leads Paul to engaging with a particular Christian form of subjectivity in which he faithfully works out the consequences of this event by the creation of a

²⁵⁴ Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 14.

Christian community centered on the truth of this event.²⁵⁵ It is worth noting that Badiou states in *Saint Paul*:

For me, truth be told, Paul is not an apostle or a saint. I care nothing for the Good News he declares, or the cult dedicated to him [and] basically, I have never really connected Paul with religion.²⁵⁶

For Badiou, the actual theological content of Pauline Christianity matters little, for as he goes on to state, “[...] let us say that so far as we are concerned it is rigorously impossible to believe in the resurrection of the crucified.”²⁵⁷ After clearing out any potential alliance between this project and the task of theology, he goes on to state that:

What is essential for us is that this paradoxical connection between a subject without identity and a law without support provides the foundation for the possibility of a universal teaching within history itself.²⁵⁸

Thus the point for Badiou is that the structure of Pauline Christianity is precisely the same as the formal structure of the relation between the subject and the event outlined in his own work. In concise terms, one encounters something that appears paradoxical according to the logic of the dominant situation and is subsequently faced with the decision of either affirming or denying the truth of this event and if they affirm this event they are ‘baptized’ into the process of a new form of subjectivity.

²⁵⁵ It is worth noting at this point that in *Theory of the Subject* Badiou claims that all truth has the form of an encounter.

²⁵⁶ Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 1.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

In a manner that relates to the ontological structure outlined thus far in this thesis, for Badiou the event exposes a void in the situation that signifies that the logic of the situation is incomplete, or non-all. To be more explicit in drawing a comparison to Kierkegaard's ontology, we could rightly say that the event is precisely what brings attention to the fracture existing within the logical structure of a situation. As Badiou himself describes it, the event is the moment in which the subject is brought to 'the edge of the void'.²⁵⁹ We can here think of Kierkegaard's discussion of the moment of anxiety during which the self gazes into the abyss of freedom and feels dizzy when made aware of the fracture of possibility in the situation. This notion of a void is so crucial as it signifies a point of emptiness, or incompleteness, at the heart of being. As Badiou argues, "the one is not"²⁶⁰ and thus rather than there being any foundational or immediate moment or substance at the heart of reality, there is the void. Kierkegaard and Badiou are in a clear structural agreement regarding this point, and similarly, each grounds free subjectivity in a primordial lack or void which precedes any process of understanding or activity. In minimal terms, we could say that Badiou (along with Kierkegaard) claims that in terms of truth, contingent events always have precedence over fixed and stable laws. Put otherwise, the radicality of truth disrupts any claim to a consistent form of legality.

While Badiou theorizes truth as being tied to the occurrence of events, he is careful to describe particular fields in which events can take place, which he calls *generic procedures*.²⁶¹ The four procedures under which a truth event can occur are art, science, politics and love. Along with these four conditions are thus four different forms of subjectivity. For anything to be an event capable of bearing a truth and inaugurating new forms of subjectivity, it must take place within one of these four conditions. We can thus see that for Badiou it is not the work of the philosopher to produce truth, but merely to provide the systematic structure by which we can understand truth and its

²⁵⁹ Badiou, *Being and Event* trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 181, 186.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 7.

effects. It is worth noting as well that this process of subjectivity is not something by which one has a ‘once and for all’ conversion during which they simply *are* this new sort of subject in the wake of an event. Rather, this baptism of the event merely inaugurates an infinite process by which the subject constantly repeats the founding gesture of the event by working out its implications one by one. An individual never *is* a subject but rather is engaged in the process of *becoming* a subject. For example, the subject formed in the wake of a radical political event cannot merely set up a new government with a new system of consistent laws and cease all revolutionary activity. A true form of political subjectivity would instead resemble a constant state of revolution, in which the situation was never settled and things were constantly re-interrogated. In a sense we could see Badiou arguing that to remain faithful to an event, a group can never become an institution in the sense Sartre outlined in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. A more basic example is two lovers who are committed to the truth of their initial encounter. It is not the case that they are ‘done’ at relating to each other at the moment they pledge fidelity to each other (whether legally or amongst themselves), rather, they must now faithfully work out the implications of this event step by step, day by day, for the rest of their lives. In this sense Badiou distinguishes truth from knowledge, as truth is always something that you do as a part of an active process of becoming while knowledge is merely that which you know in a logical fashion. Once again, this bears clear resemblance to Kierkegaard’s distinction between abstraction and appropriation, or, objective and subjective truth.

To briefly summarize before moving on, for Badiou an event emerges through a void within a situation and brings a novel truth into existence. This event opens up the possibility for new forms of subjectivity that are created through a fidelity to an event and always exceed the logic and possibility of a particular situation. Underlying this theory of the event is an ontological structure that is non-totalizable and grounded in a pure lack and thus novelty is always possible, as a situation is never settled once and for all.

Finally, it is worth noting that Badiou's systematic philosophy can also be referred to as a *mathematical materialism* and thus it makes sense to at least briefly explain why he places emphasis on mathematics and what he means by materialism. To begin with the former idea, he states early on in *Being and Event* that, "mathematics is ontology."²⁶² For Badiou this means that rather than functioning as a sort of analogy for ontological structure, the language of mathematics allows us to literally speak the language of the ontological. In particular he relies on post-Cantorian set theory and its notion of the trans-finite to argue that "the one is not"²⁶³ and that there is no 'set of all sets', meaning that there is no foundational whole, or unity, at the heart of being and that there is no such thing as a consistent totality of all that exists. This thus paves the way for Badiou's insistence on the void being at the heart of being and the inconsistency and creative potential of this void subsequently making it impossible for us to speak of the totality of what exists, or may possibly exist.

Badiou's materialism follows on from this mathematical structure. He refers to his particular brand of materialism as *materialist dialectics*, which he opposes to what he labels *democratic materialism*. According to the logic of the later form of materialism, "there are only 'bodies and languages.'"²⁶⁴ In simple terms, he thinks that this form of materialism (which he loosely associates with thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Antonio Negri) is rigorously immanent and grounded in a foundational one. His form of materialism differs as it claims, "there are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths."²⁶⁵ This 'except that' makes all the difference for Badiou, as truths signify precisely that 'the one is not' and that rather than a materialism which operates as a rigorously immanent immanence (with no gaps or fractures) his is an immanent materialism which is characterized by voids, cuts and gaps which allow novel truths to emerge from within the structure of materiality. In terms more reminiscent of Kierkegaard's language, we could say that Badiou's materialism is one in which

²⁶² Ibid., p. 4.

²⁶³ Ibid., p. 23.

²⁶⁴ Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 1.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

transcendence emerges from within a structure of immanence. Following this, his materialism follows the non-all structure that we see in the work of many of the post-Lacanian materialist (Žižek, Johnston, Malabou) in which matter is marked precisely by its incomplete, or fractured, structure. This can also allow us to distinguish this materialism from any sort of ontological naturalism; as for Badiou there can never be such a thing as ‘nature’ as it would signify a consistent totality and formal system of logic lacking any sort of underlying contingency.²⁶⁶ This sort of materialism thus makes contingency and novelty ontological primary and makes it impossible for us to ever develop a theorization of such a thing as nature as a consistent totality, or along the same lines, history, as both would imply the perspective of consistency, finality or totality. Or in the terms used by Kierkegaard, they would both imply the existence of the system.

It is also worth noting precisely what it is which makes Badiou’s materialism dialectical. Following the work of Adrian Johnston we could say that rather than mirroring the dialectical structure of traditional interpretations of Hegel, which Badiou criticizes in each of his major works, he offers a meta-dialectical structure in which the dialectic itself dialectically oscillates between the dialectical and the non-dialectical.²⁶⁷ Put otherwise, for Badiou there is both a traditional dialectical structure as well as the non-dialectical emergence of events that radically break with previous situations and invent new forms of logic which have no precedent in the existing situation.

Johnston’s description of Badiou’s materialist ontology as meta-dialectical comes extremely close to the structure that I have been describing in Kierkegaard’s ontology throughout this thesis. For example, it has been made clear that in many ways Kierkegaard’s account of reality and subjectivity follows directly from Hegel’s logical and dialectical structure. The difference, however, is that for Kierkegaard our individual and free subjectivity depends on paradox (or, fracture) which occurs at the point at which dialectical logic can venture no further and only the activity of willed,

²⁶⁶ Badiou outlines this in Meditation Twelve of *Being and Event* (pp. 130-141)

²⁶⁷ Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek and Political Transformation*, p. xxii.

contingent subjectivity can leap across this abyss. Following this it seems that rather than characterizing Kierkegaard as anti-dialectical (or anti-Hegelian) it would be more philosophically productive to also consider his fractured dialectic as a meta-dialectical structure in which he dialecticizes the dialectic itself. Thus both Kierkegaard and Badiou share in common the critique of the underlying emphasis on necessity and logical process common to a certain brand of idealism and instead aim to place a moment of possibility (grounded in fracture or void) at the beginning of this dialectical process. Both Badiou and Kierkegaard share a prioritization of contingent events over any sort of necessity, as for both subjectivity is a process of bringing the consequences of truth into existence, as Badiou himself remarks, “truth is entirely subjective.”²⁶⁸

5.5 Badiou and Kierkegaard

Before presenting a systematic outline of the development of Badiou’s theory of subjectivity I will first outline the relation between his ‘materialist dialectics’ and the work of Kierkegaard. It is clear that Kierkegaard, whether explicitly or implicitly, has played a notable influence on the philosophical tradition informing much of Badiou’s orientation, and it is well known that the influence of Kierkegaard was prominent in pre-war French philosophy. While his corpus is vast and still growing, Badiou only has two direct textual engagements with the work of Kierkegaard. One, in his *Briefings on Existence*,²⁶⁹ is little more than a passing reference without much theoretical significance, and the other an entire chapter in *Logics of Worlds*.

The first mention takes place in the prologue to *Briefings*, entitled “God is Dead.” In this prologue Badiou proclaims that he takes the formula “God is dead” literally.²⁷⁰ Badiou then goes on to interrogate the claim of Kierkegaard’s formula for the self from *The Sickness unto Death*: “The self

²⁶⁸ Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 14.

²⁶⁹ Badiou, *Briefings on Existence* trans. Norma Madarasz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

²⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 23.

is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself' (*SUD* 13). For Badiou, "God is dead means that he is no longer the living being who can be encountered when existence breaks the ice of its own transparency."²⁷¹ Thus, when there is no longer a living God to establish this mode of relation, there is no longer a way to purify the effect of subjective despair. This is problematic for Badiou, since for him the subject cannot be founded by something that resides outside of immanent existence, and for him the concept of God carries this sense of absolute and transcendent otherness. At this point, the appearance of Kierkegaard in Badiou's writing seems incidental at best, and fails to interact with his work in any profound or telling manner.

The other, and much more substantial, engagement Badiou has with Kierkegaard takes place in *Logics of Worlds*, which serves as the sequel to *Being and Event*. Whereas *Being and Event* is primarily concerned with providing a mathematical ontology (based on axiomatic set theory) that could account for the being of the subject, *Logics of Worlds* attempts to supplement this with a mathematical phenomenology (this time based on category theory) that can account for the appearing of truths and their accompanying subject-bodies in evental worlds.

Book VI of *Logics of Worlds* bears the title "Theory of Points." Put simply, Badiou theorizes a point as an impasse in the subjective process which forces a decision, a "yes" or a "no" from a subject. Usually this point is one that forces the subject to either give up (denying the truth of an evental occurrence) or keep going (which serves to affirm the truth of the event). Badiou subsequently considers the thought of Kierkegaard as it pertains to this manner of absolute choice. The chapter opens by situating Kierkegaard in the lineage of the anti-philosophical tradition, with Kierkegaard serving as the ultimate anti-philosopher who is for/against Hegel.²⁷² He goes on to note, "for Kierkegaard, the key to existence is none other than absolute choice, the alternative, disjunction

²⁷¹ Ibid., p. 24.

²⁷² Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, p. 425.

without remainder.”²⁷³ Badiou once again brings up the famous formula of the relational self from *The Sickness unto Death*, this time calling the formula “very beautiful.”²⁷⁴ For Badiou, “the dispute between Hegel and Kierkegaard is in effect a dispute about Christianity, and it concerns the function of decision in the constitution of Christian subjectivity.”²⁷⁵

For Kierkegaard, the important thing is that, for Christianity, the eternal itself appears in time, and thus the universal for a moment becomes singular. Badiou notes that this stands in opposition to Hegel, for whom time is the “being there of the concept.”²⁷⁶ But in opposition to this “spectacular fusion of time and eternity,” Badiou notes that, for Kierkegaard, “the time that is at stake in Christianity is my time, and Christian truth is of the order of what happens to me, and not what I contemplate.”²⁷⁷

Badiou describes Kierkegaard’s “Christian paradox” in a way that sounds very similar to his own theory of event, in which something infinite emerges from within finite materiality. He argues that this Christian paradox is: “A challenge addressed to the existence of each and everyone, and not a reflective theme that a deft use of dialectical mediations would externally enlist in the spectacular fusion of time and eternity.”²⁷⁸ Once again, Badiou’s description of Kierkegaard’s thought paints a picture quite similar to Badiou’s own position. For Badiou, an event is something that necessitates a response from each person. There is little room for reflection on possibility in Badiou’s subjective axiom, as one must always say “yes” or “no” to the event, and subsequently continue this process in the working out of the event’s implications. Moving on to consider the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Badiou argues that Kierkegaard has an entirely militant theory of truth, which places him in

²⁷³Ibid.

²⁷⁴Ibid.

²⁷⁵Ibid., p. 426.

²⁷⁶Ibid.

²⁷⁷Ibid.

²⁷⁸Ibid.

complete fidelity with the apostle Paul, who is another one of Badiou's favored non-philosophical sources.²⁷⁹ He goes on to provide this lengthy quotation from the *Postscript*:

Only the truth which *builds up* is a truth *for you*. This is an essential predicate relating to truth as inwardness; its decisive characterization as upbuilding *for you*, that is, for the subject, is its essential difference from all objective knowledge, inasmuch as the subjectivity itself becomes part of the mark of the truth.²⁸⁰

This passage is used to highlight what Badiou sees as the essential difference between Hegel and Kierkegaard, and why for this reason his theory of the subject is more indebted to Kierkegaard's anti-philosophy. The crucial points are the *essential difference of the subject from all objective knowledge*, and the fact that *subjectivity itself becomes a part of the mark which signifies truth*. While for Hegel (as Badiou understands his project) it is necessary that one have knowledge of the stages of becoming-subject of the absolute, Kierkegaard insists that knowing is useless, and that rather than knowing the absolute, one experiences it through a process of subjective inwardness.²⁸¹ Once again, Badiou is here providing a reading of Kierkegaard that aligns him with his own position, since the Badiouian subject can never *know* the truth of an event, but rather plays an experiential role in the *becoming* of this truth. Rather than attain any form of objective knowledge, Badiou's militant subject always participates in the process of becoming inherent to any truth. Badiou thus goes on to argue, "That is why, for Kierkegaard, there cannot exist a moment of knowledge ('absolute knowledge,' in Hegel's

²⁷⁹See Alain Badiou, *St. Paul*

²⁸⁰ *CUP*, p. 252-3. Translation slightly modified by Badiou.

²⁸¹Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, pp. 426-7.

terms) where truth is complete or present as a result. Everything commences, or recommences, with each subjective singularity.”²⁸² Shortly after Badiou states:

In our own vocabulary, we could say that Kierkegaard vigorously maintains that thought and truth must not simply account for their being, but also for their appearing, which is to say for their existence....Thinking must also be a form of commitment in the thought that thinks.²⁸³

Once again we see Badiou reading his own theory of subjectivity back into the work of Kierkegaard. Because truth is never something that can be complete, or present as the result of any previous process, it is up to the militant subject of that truth to continually recommence the process of working out the implications of this truth, and each point of recommencement is what Badiou calls a point, in which the subject says ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

The rest of this engagement with Kierkegaard revolves around investigating the link between truth, subject and point in his work.²⁸⁴ Badiou begins by focusing on the foundation for truth in the work of Kierkegaard, the Christian paradox. As we have already seen, the Christian paradox offers a conception of truth and of the subjective response to truth that, at least formally, mirrors that of Badiou. The crucial difference is, of course, that for Kierkegaard this paradox is dependent on God, and the human must exist in absolute relation to God, while for Badiou, on the other hand, God is long dead.

²⁸²Ibid., p. 427.

²⁸³Ibid.

²⁸⁴Ibid., p. 428.

Badiou goes on to argue that “if ‘truth’ is the name of a subjective connection constructed between existence and eternity, Kierkegaard very clearly proposes a conception of truth as always generic or anonymous.”²⁸⁵ On Badiou’s reading, and once again in line with his own system, this means that the experience of truth is available to anyone, regardless of who or where they are, the truth never discriminates or excludes. Badiou also remarks that Kierkegaard is especially close to the idea of incorporation, which for Badiou signifies the inclusion of the individual into a subject-body that collectively works out the implications of a truth.

Following the reading of Slavoj Žižek,²⁸⁶ Badiou next notes the vast difference between the leap from the aesthetic to the ethical and the leap from the ethical to the religious. On Badiou’s reading, this second leap is much more complex and obscure than the first because the religious sphere involves the abiding of subjectivity in the absolute paradox itself. Badiou here reads the religious stage of existence as the moment of incorporation of the subject into truth itself.²⁸⁷ The religious, or Christian, stage is the one that requires the absolute choice of saying “yes” to the absurd in an absolute subjective commitment which refuses to hold to any objective certainty. Badiou goes on to argue “the moment of absolute choice, and it alone, reveals subjective energy.”²⁸⁸ At this point Badiou highlights one of the points of divergence between his own thought and that of Kierkegaard, and this is a point at which Badiou could gain something through a further consideration of the Kierkegaardian framework, and its accompanying anthropology.

He here notes that it is a passion, a subjective energy, which “grounds the possibility for the subject to encounter reality in time.”²⁸⁹ This energy or passion, which Kierkegaard also refers to as will, is something that thoroughly humanizes the subject in his thought. This is problematic for

²⁸⁵Ibid., p. 429.

²⁸⁶See Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso 2008), pp. 396-7.

²⁸⁷Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, p. 430.

²⁸⁸Ibid., p. 431.

²⁸⁹Ibid.

Badiou because his theory of subjectivity goes to great lengths to avoid any form of humanism, and especially any emphasis on the subject as an individual human entity. Badiou then goes on to close his discussion of Kierkegaard by noting the specifically Christian limitation of his thought.²⁹⁰ Badiou not only considers what he sees as the teleological character of Christian religion, but the limitation placed on the subject by the necessity of its relationship to God. If there is no God, then the subject is left in a situation of absolute despair with no absolute with which to relate. Badiou closes this chapter noting “this figure [of the Christian subject] only holds up if it is supported by God, to the extent that his own coming has taken place in time.”²⁹¹ While he finds much in common with his formal theory of existence and subjectivity, the place of the divine in Kierkegaard’s thought is what ultimately leaves it as no more than an anti-philosophical resource for Badiou.

As I have previously argued in chapter three of the present study, Kierkegaard’s ontology need not necessitate the orthodox theological reliance on a traditionally Christian conception of God as Badiou argues here, and along with that, both chapters two and three have previously shown the manner in which the response to anxiety and despair is never the ‘healing power’ of God’s support, but rather a faithful acceptance of the contingency of possibility. As I will show in the conclusion, neither faith nor love depends on any sort of theological orthodoxy or certainty.

Now that I have outlined Badiou’s general project and analyzed his previous interaction with the work of Kierkegaard, I will now provide a detailed account of his theory of subjectivity. It is my contention that not only does this theory bear a serious conceptual and structural relation to that of Kierkegaard, but that Kierkegaard’s account is already capable of offering a corrective to some of the problems remaining in Badiou’s theorization of the subject. In particular, I will point out what I will refer to as the ‘external’ and ‘internal’ tendencies of Badiou’s theory of subjectivity, eventually arguing that he fails to provide an account capable of theorizing both external (or collective) and

²⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 433.

²⁹¹ Ibid., p. 435.

internal (or individual) activities of engaged subjectivity. I will then attempt to use the reading of Kierkegaard developed throughout this thesis to serve as a corrective to Badiou's materialist theory of subjectivity.

5.6 Badiou's Theories of Subjectivity

Badiou's first major theoretical work, *Theory of the Subject*, contains many of the developments found in *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds* in their germinal form; including the 'materialist dialectic' he will return to 24 years later. That said, this work lacks the systematic nature found in Badiou's later works, as it was initially written as a set of lectures covering a wide range of topics. Another important aspect of this work is the role of mathematics. While Badiou will later go on to make the famous assertion that mathematics equals ontology, at this point the role of mathematics is purely analogical and thus the formal accounts of subjectivity present in this work cannot be equated with an actual description of ontological structure. Rather, this structural account has more to do with psychoanalytic concepts gleaned from Lacan than it does with any sort of set-theoretical ontology. While this work covers a wide array of philosophical, political, and psychoanalytic ground, I will only be concerned with the model of subjectivity Badiou develops in this work. In concise terms, Badiou strives in this work to develop a theory of formal subjectivity that could supplement the scientific (and anti-humanist) reading of Marx posed by Althusser and his students.

In many ways this work utilizes the psychoanalytic tradition to attempt to supplement Marxist materialism with a formal theory of the subject. To quote Badiou:

We demand of *materialism* that it include what we need and which Marxism, even without

knowing it, has always made into its guiding thread: a theory of the subject.²⁹²

Along with this Badiou goes on to note that this “materialism centered upon a theory of the subject (which is a conceptual black sheep) is equally necessary for our most pressing political needs.”²⁹³ For Badiou, the point of articulating a rigorous materialism is overwhelmingly political in nature and he considers the lack of a theory of the subject to be a crucial deficiency in the Marxist-materialism of his time. It could be said that this concern with being able to think about subjectivity in materialist terms stems from Badiou’s focus on theorizing the new, and the manner in which he considers subjectivity the body supporting novelty in concrete political sequences.

While in Badiou’s later work politics becomes only one of four distinct truth procedures, early on in *Theory of the Subject* Badiou makes the claim that “every subject is political. This is why there are few subjects and rarely any politics.”²⁹⁴ Thus the dialectical interaction between the subject and matter is necessarily political, as the freedom of this subject is first and foremost the freedom to re-inscribe itself into the real of materiality. Along with this, it is crucial to note that this political subject in no way signifies an individual human consciousness, but rather, the collective form of subjectivity embodied in the political party and its support of a novel political sequence. Badiou will thus argue that the proletariat “is the subjective name of the new in our time.”²⁹⁵

An important aspect of this theory of the subject and one that will serve as important in tracking the development from this text to *Logics of Worlds* are the ‘four concepts of the subject’ that Badiou develops to describe the process of subjectivization experienced by every properly political subject. These four concepts are: anxiety-courage-superego-justice, all of which Badiou gleans from

²⁹² Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 182.

²⁹³ Ibid. p. 189.

²⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 28.

²⁹⁵ Ibid. p. 71.

Lacan's psychoanalytic account of subjectivity.²⁹⁶ These concepts describe different stages of the process of becoming subject. Initially this subject (or, party) faces anxiety at the uncertainty of its projected future, as there is no certainty accompanying their political sequence. Courage is the moment at which the subject decides to forge ahead in the face of this anxiety inducing uncertainty and continue forth in its political process. The superego is the point at which the party is tempted by an external structure (offering consistency) to give up its impossible project. Justice, the final concept, signifies the point at which the party fights the temptation to be re-inscribed into the structure of power and instead creates its own structure of absolute equality. These are the concepts which must necessarily mark any full process of subjectivization for Badiou, although it is crucial to note that in a properly Maoist fashion, the revolutionary subject-party is never a 'complete' process, as the concept of justice remains open and must be constantly re-considered and worked out.

To summarize, the subject in *Theory of the Subject* is always political, always collective, and must necessarily be a material configuration and process. Along with this, the subject is marked by four fundamental concepts: anxiety-courage-superego-justice. It is important to note that at this point these are not affects that pull the subject forward into a process, but rather concepts marking the existence of the subject in its process of subjectivization. This early development of Badiou's theory of the subject is important as it hints at formal and affective tendencies that will be pushed to their respective limits in Badiou's next two major works.

While *Theory of the Subject* was more-or-less a set of coherent lectures on the possibility of a materialist theory of subjectivity to supplement Marxism, Badiou's next major work, *Being and Event*, is a full-scale systematic ontology with a formal theory of subjectivity, both grounded in the

²⁹⁶ While these four concepts are gleaned from Lacan, there is also an interesting comparison to be made between this and Sartre's account of the development of political groups in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason Vol. 1*. In many senses, Badiou could be seen as reading Sartre's account of group-formation in Lacanian terms against the background of an Althusserian materialism. This would seem to be a reasonable assumption to make as Badiou himself has claimed that Sartre, Lacan and Althusser are his three masters and primary influences.

axiomatics of set-theory. While mathematics had a purely analogical function in *Theory of the Subject*, in *Being and Event* mathematics serves as the formal language of ontology as such. In other words, set-theory becomes the language by which we can speak of reality in-itself. This emphasis on formal ontology does not take away from Badiou's emphasis on subjectivity and in this work he casts aside the necessarily human and political implications of the subject as described in *Theory of the Subject* in favor of a purely formal account of the subject given in the language of set theory.

In this work Badiou defines the subject as "any local configuration of a generic procedure from which a truth is supported."²⁹⁷ From this definition he proceeds to list what the subject is not: a substance, a void point, the organization of a sense of experience, or an invariable of presentation.²⁹⁸ This subject only emerges through a relationship to an event and a subsequent fidelity to this event. Badiou notes that this subjective process is the "[...] liaison between the event (thus the intervention) and the procedure of fidelity (thus its operator of connection)."²⁹⁹ Because of its liaison between the two terms, the subject is neither the intervention nor the operator of fidelity, but instead exists as the advent of their two.³⁰⁰

This position exemplifies the external tendencies of Badiou's account of subjectivity, in which the role of the subject is to support the truth presented by an event wholly external to the subject. The subject is thus the middle term between the intervention of an event into the situation and the procedure by which the consequences of this event are collectively worked out. In this sense, the subject does not exist prior to the evental intervention, i.e., it only exists in its relation to an external force that essentially draws it into existence. There is no account given of any form of pre-evental subjectivity, as this would lead to an account of pre-subjective consciousness which would be little

²⁹⁷ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 391.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 239.

³⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 393.

more than ‘the organization of a sense of experience’, something which we have previously noted Badiou argues is absolutely non-subjective.

It is important to note that during the period of *Being and Event* there were only two subjective responses to the truth emerging through an event: the positive faithful procedure, and the negative procedure.³⁰¹ In this sense Badiou sets up a very hard line on the nature of subjectivity, either one is a subject or one is not. The faithful subjective procedure would consist of the subject naming the event and subsequently supporting the truth of the event through a subjective fidelity. This fidelity is never forced, but must be chosen by the subject and thus decision serves as a crucial category for the subjective process in Badiou. Along with the emphasis on subjective decision, it must be noted that the event will always remain unverifiable in the present situation and thus the subject has no way of knowing for sure whether the truth emerging through this event is actually true. We must here note that the negative subject does not in any sense witness an event and then make a decision to not follow its consequences; it simply does not recognize the event. If *Theory of the Subject* laid the groundwork for both formal and affective accounts of subjectivity, *Being and Event* represents the most rigorously formal account given by Badiou over the course of his three major works.

While *Being and Event* exemplifies the most formal tendency in the development of Badiou’s theory of subjectivity, his theory takes an affective turn in his most recent major work *Logics of Worlds*. While I have already explicated the four concepts of the subject Badiou introduces in *Theory of the Subject*, I will now show how these four concepts re-appear in *Logics of Worlds* as the four affects of the subjective process. Rather than serving as merely conceptual descriptions of the process of the becoming-subject of the party, this theory of affects provides an account of how it is that the pre-subjective human animal finds itself drawn into the process of becoming-subject through an internal response to external affects. Along with the addition of a theory of subjective affect, *Logics of*

³⁰¹ Ibid. p. 394.

Worlds also contains a materialist theory of life. While going to great lengths to distinguish this theory of life from any bio-political notion of the term, Badiou's theory of life signifies the possibility of a subject to 'truly live' by continuously creating a new present through the consistent affirmation of the consequences of an event and the creation of a new world.

It is worth noting that while Badiou's theory of affect as developed in *Logics of Worlds* seems to take more seriously the role of the pre-evental (or, internal) subject, this pre-evental individual is little more than a human animal in Badiou's terms. To put it bluntly, while the post-evental subject is able to transcend the state of any given situation through the faithful working out of a truth, the pre-evental human animal is only able to operate in the terms provided by the situation. Thus, while the post-evental subject participates in the creation of justice, the human animal can hope for little more than survival.

Whereas Badiou's *Being and Event* was concerned with the *being* of the subject, *Logics of Worlds* is concerned with the *appearing* of the subject and how a singular truth can appear in subjective form in distinct worlds. He provides an updated definition of the subject early on in *Logics of Worlds* as "an operative disposition of the traces of the event and of what they deploy in the world."³⁰² *Logics of Worlds* also provides a theory of four distinct modes of subjectivity: the faithful subject, the reactive subject, the obscure subject, and the resurrected subject (who repeats a truth in a new world). It is crucial at this point to note that for Badiou the subject is still *non-individual* just as it was in *Theory of the Subject* and *Being and Event*. Thus in *Logics of Worlds* Badiou claims that the subject-body is the collective formation that "imposes the readability of a unified orientation onto the multiplicity of bodies."³⁰³

Along with this phenomenology of subjective appearance, Badiou also provides a theory of affect that accounts for the gripping of a subject by an event. Badiou theorizes these affects as being

³⁰² Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, p. 33.

³⁰³ Ibid. p. 3.

the anthropological form of local signs of the present as embodied in the subject. For each type of faithful subject Badiou assigns a unique affect: for the political subject, it is *enthusiasm*; for the subject of art, it is *pleasure*; for the subject of love, it is *happiness*; and for the scientific subject, it is *joy*.

Badiou supplements these affects characterizing the individual generic procedures with a universal process of four affects which signal the incorporation of a human animal into the process of becoming-subject. These affects are *terror*, *anxiety*, *courage*, and *justice*. It is worth noting the way in which these four affects of the subject mirror the four concepts of the subject found in *Theory of the Subject*: anxiety, courage, superego, justice.

The first, *terror*, “testifies to the desire for a great point.”³⁰⁴ This point serves as the decisive discontinuity that brings about the new in an instantaneous fashion, and completes the subject in the process. The second, *anxiety*, “testifies to the fear of points,”³⁰⁵ in which the human animal fears the choice between two hypotheses that come with no guarantee. The third, *courage*, “affirms the acceptance of the plurality of points.”³⁰⁶ The final affect is *justice*, which “affirms the equivalence of what is continuous and negotiated, on the one hand, and of what is discontinuous and violent, on the other.”³⁰⁷ To justice, all categories of action are thus subordinated to the absolute contingency of worlds.

Badiou goes on to note, “all affects are necessary in order for the incorporation of a human animal to unfold in a subjective process, so that the grace of being immortal may be accorded to this animal.”³⁰⁸ Thus, the human animal must go through each affect to enter into the process of ‘becoming-subject’.

While it is intriguing to see Badiou relying so much on language of affect in *Logics Of Worlds*,

³⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 86.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 87.

one is left wondering what or whom is actually feeling these affects and along these same lines, how does a/the subject ‘feel’ an affect? This is especially troubling, as Badiou has already defined the subject as an operative disposition. One could then pose the question, just how does an operative disposition feel an affect? It seems as if Badiou wants to attribute specifically human forms of affect (i.e., anxiety, courage) to a purely formal structure. While Badiou has included the category of the ‘human animal’ in *Logics of Worlds* (a category he first introduced in his *Ethics*), he still has not explained why it is that humans have access to the affects accompanying events as well as the capacity to experience and subjectively respond to these affects in an act of decision. We can see at this point that Badiou’s theory of subjectivity still remains largely external in so much as a majority of his theorization of subjectivity takes place after the event, while in the pre-evental the not-yet-subject is little more than a human animal.

As I have already stated, *Logics of Worlds* contains a theory of life that in some ways can be seen to accompany his theory of affects. In the introduction to the work Badiou claims:

My idea is rather- at the cost, it’s true, of a spectacular displacement- to bring this word [life] back to the centre of philosophical thinking, in the guise of a methodical response to the question ‘What is it to live?’³⁰⁹

Shortly after he provides a description of what it might mean to live, stating: “[...] to live is to participate, point by point, in the organization of a new body, in which a faithful subjective formalism comes to take root.”³¹⁰

³⁰⁹ Ibid. p. 35.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

Badiou's formulation of the question, 'What is it to live?' finds its home in the final chapter of *Logics of Worlds*, which bears this question as its title. Here, Badiou connects the possibility of life to the trace of a vanished event, noting that this trace signals the subject towards life.³¹¹ He goes on to note that it is not just the recognition of this trace that provides the possibility of life, but that one must "incorporate oneself into what the trace authorizes in terms of consequences."³¹² Badiou then provides a response to a previously un-answered question, 'what is life?' To this he responds with "life is the creation of a present [but this is a continuous creation]."³¹³ Thus for Badiou, life is the process by which the subject works out the consequences of a truth point by point. As we have seen, his description of the process of life is more or less parallel to the process of becoming subject, so living for Badiou is just another name to describe the process of faithful subjectivity. While the addition of theories of both life and affect in this later work may seem to edge Badiou closer to bridging the divide between external and internal theories of materialist subjectivity, his lack of a theorization of the pre-evental human animal leave his theory firmly on the side of external (or conceptual) philosophy. It seems like this inability to bridge this gap stems from a strong conviction against any humanist or anthropocentric conceptions of philosophy, and an equally strong commitment to philosophical materialism (one which crucially leaves out the natural sciences as a resource for materialism). Throughout his corpus Badiou has avoided any substantial discussion of consciousness, humanism, or serious interaction with the natural or biological sciences and this avoidance is what leaves him unable to get past the conceptual, or external, account of subjectivity.

The crucial question remains, what is it about the structure of the human animal that enables it to experience the affects produced by events and how is this human animal able to freely decide to enter into the process of becoming-subject opened up by these events? Although Badiou has clearly

³¹¹ Ibid. p. 507.

³¹² Ibid. p. 508.

³¹³ Ibid.

utilized much of his master Sartre's later work as found in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, he has avoided reckoning with the account of internal consciousness found in Sartre's major early work, *Being and Nothingness*.

While I have shown that over the course of his three major works that Badiou has gradually refined his theory of the subject to get closer to crossing the gap existing in recent materialist articulations of the subject between external and internal accounts of subjectivity; there still exists major difficulties with his recent turn to considering the subject in the terms of 'life' and 'affect'.

A major problem that follows on from this is Badiou's theorization of the 'human-animal'. For Badiou, before the emergence of a faithful subject-body, there are merely human animals, without an orienting idea and subsequently, not truly living. The question is then, what is it about this 'human animal' that enables it to make a decision in the wake of an event? And equally, what is it about this 'human animal' that allows it to feel the affect of these events, and subsequently respond with a living commitment to an idea? While Badiou sometimes relies on a notion of grace to describe this transition from the human-animal to the 'living-and-faithful subject', this notion seems to risk collapsing the whole process back into a mystical and religious trope. While Badiou is justified in wanting to avoid an appeal to a sort of phenomenological consciousness which structures the pre-subjective human-animal, it seems equally problematic to attempt to argue that a structural formalism is able to 'feel' affects such as happiness, joy, and enthusiasm and then respond to these feelings with decision, belief, and commitment that enable this formalism to 'become immortal' in the on-going process of 'living for an idea.'

As Badiou explains in *Ethics*, "the subject, therefore, in no way pre-exists the process. He is absolutely nonexistent in the situation 'before' the event. We might say that the process of truth *induces* a subject."³¹⁴ He goes on:

³¹⁴ Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2011), p. 43.

[...] it is important to understand that the ‘subject’, thus conceived, does not overlap with the psychological subject, nor even with the reflexive subject (in Descartes’s sense) or the transcendental subject (in Kant’s sense).³¹⁵

Once again, we see that Badiou’s conception of the subject has nothing to do with a psychological, reflexive or transcendental account. In an interview with Peter Hallward, when asked about the distinction drawn between animal life and subjective immortality in a line of questioning interrogating this lack of an account of the pre-evental subject, Badiou states that “I do think, *by grace*, this particular animal is sometimes seized by something that thought cannot manage to reduce strictly to the thought of animality as such.”³¹⁶

The critique I am offering against Badiou’s theory of subjectivity - that he fails to account for the manner in which the pre-subjective human animal is able to transcend itself and become a part of a subjective process - bears similarity to recent critiques leveled at his project by both Hallward and Žižek. While neither identifies the same issue I am here focusing on, or uses Kierkegaard as a solution to the problem, they each focus on the problem of the role of the human in the work of Badiou along with the previously discussed internal/external problem.

Hallward, in a review essay of Badiou’s *Logics of Worlds* has stated that:

The problem is that Badiou assumes but does not account for the status of the middle and mediating term - the status of *beings*. Neither Badiou’s ontology nor his logic seem to provide

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Ibid., p. 133.

any clear place for ordinary ontic reality. What appears in our various Parisian worlds, clearly, are not instances of pure being or multiplicity, but people.³¹⁷

Hallward's critique takes a more general, and purely ontological, form than the one I have been offering in terms of the status of the human. He is here pointing out the lack of account given by Badiou of ordinary beings and objects that serve as the sort of material conditions for the more-than-material truth emerging through the event. It is interesting for my purpose that at the end of this quote Hallward notes that what we normally end up with in Badiou's Parisian worlds are simply *people*. This maps on quite clearly to what I am arguing in the present work, that no matter how Badiou constructs his account of subjectivity in a purely formalist manner; in reality he is normally relying on human beings to serve as the bearers of truth. And along with this, he does not offer an account of the manner in which the human being ends up serving as the 'middle and mediating term' between an event and its consequences. In this case though, it is clear that Hallward is more interested in pushing towards a rigorous theory of ontic categories in general in the work of Badiou rather than he is with acknowledging the centrality of the human in this work and developing a more formal anthropology.

Žižek's own critique of the theory of 'human animal' in Badiou begins with a response to this very same Hallward quote used previously. While Hallward is interested in a further development of an account of ontic categories in Badiou's formal ontology, Žižek is interested in the conditions of possibility that enable the human animal to transcend its immanent conditions and become immortal through a post-evental subjective sequence. Žižek argues that:

³¹⁷ Peter Hallward, 'Order and Event', *New Left Review*, 53, September-October, 2008, p. 118.

At the level of the Event, the “negativity” of anxiety and the (death) drive has to be posited as prior to the affirmative enthusiasm for the Event, as its condition of possibility.³¹⁸

Here Žižek makes a similar claim to the critique I have been offering in this chapter, namely, that there must be something which comes prior to the affirmative (and external) enthusiasm for the event and that this something prior serves as the very possibility for the conditions of post-evental forms of subjectivity as such. For Žižek, this pre-condition must be the ‘negativity of anxiety’ and the ‘death drive’, concepts he is using in a psychoanalytic sense. The point for Žižek is that prior to the external activity and fidelity in relation to an event there must be an originary and negative relation that take place within the very structure of the self. It is crucial for my purposes that Žižek here relies on anxiety as the concept which signifies the primordial negativity within the internal structure of the self. I have already shown that for Kierkegaard this moment of negativity (anxiety), is the first moment of the process of becoming a self at the internal level and is thus the pre-condition for both subjective reflection and subsequent decisive activity.³¹⁹

Žižek also offers a critique of the latent religiosity in Badiou’s theory of subjectivity, particularly as regards his use of the concept of grace to account for the human animal’s radical transformation into the immortal subject, stating:

How do we avoid the reproach that an Event is a proto-religious miracle which intervenes from some transcendent Beyond in the order of being?³²⁰

³¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), p. 805.

³¹⁹ While I have been emphasizing the manner in which Kierkegaard pre-figures many of the post-Hegelian ontological moves of contemporary European materialist philosophy, Žižek’s discussion seems to point towards the manner in which Kierkegaard’s psychological account also pre-figures some of the key moves of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

³²⁰ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 811.

His point here, which is one that I have previously outlined in my own reading, is that by refusing to acknowledge a sort of ‘minimal anthropology’³²¹ at the heart of his theory of subjectivity, Badiou risks simply collapsing his mathematical materialist formalism back into the sort of postmodern theological discourse he seeks to be in absolute distinction to. Following this, it is once again clear that a Kierkegaardian corrective to the internal/external problem in Badiou’s theory of subjectivity ends up creating a *less* theological theory of subjectivity.

Žižek once again draws a clear connection between Badiou and the importance of a primordial concept of anxiety when he states:

The Event in its first emergence causes anxiety, since by definition it shatters the transcendental coordinates of a World. It is this anxiety which affects everyone, all subjects of a world [...].³²²

My own critique follows the major points made by both Hallward and Žižek to various extents. With Hallward, I agree that no matter how anti-humanist Badiou attempts to frame his project, it is still always people who end up being the mediating term between an event and its consequences. Following this, I affirm with Žižek that there has to be something particular about the human animal that allows it to bear the consequences of a truth in the first place. Like Žižek, I think anxiety is this universal experience of the subject that allows it to respond to the abyss in a situation with new forms of subjectivity. The major difference between my criticism and those of Hallward and Žižek is

³²¹ I owe this term to Dr. Nina Power, Roehampton University.

³²² Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 837-38.

that I am here contending that Kierkegaard already offers a theory capable of bridging this gap between the internal and external aspects of the subject in its pre and post evental activity, a position I will further outline in the next sections.

5.7 Kierkegaard and Badiou

One of the first points of similarity we can note when thinking of Badiou's project in terms of Kierkegaard is the connection between truth and subjectivity. Just as Kierkegaard famously stated, "truth is subjectivity" (*CUP* 189), we can equally say that for Badiou truth is necessarily a subjective process, or more precisely, truth only *is* when supported by the work of collective subjectivity. As we have previously seen Badiou state in *Saint Paul*, "truth is entirely subjective."³²³ In both cases we must also note the temptation to read either of these figures as arguing that truth is subjectivity in the crass sense of attempting to argue that 'what is true *for me* is truth', instead, both Badiou and Kierkegaard note that without the support of material subjectivity and willed activity, truth is nothing more than an idea which has no real effect in the actuality of the world. In the same way in which Kierkegaard notes that the ideal must be brought into collision with reality through subjective activity, Badiou does not think that an event has the power to magically install its own consequences in a situation. Rather, the truth brought about through an event creates the conditions by which ordinary human animals can transform into immortal subjects capable of collectively working out the consequences of these events.

Another fairly obvious manner in which Badiou seems to embody a Kierkegaardian ethos is the emphasis on the evental nature of truth. For both Badiou and Kierkegaard truth is something that happens, not something that merely exists in any logical or objective fashion. Further, this truth always breaks with the consistent logic of a situation in a moment of paradox. For Badiou, an event

³²³ Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 14.

can never be comprehended within the logic of a situation, which is why an event necessitates the creation of new forms of language or logic. Thus the event is always characterized by being in excess of the immanent logic of the situation in a fashion similar to the manner in which for Kierkegaard any immanent, or ethical, logic eventually hits a paradoxical point at which the subject must decide to make a faithful leap. In both senses this eventual truth opens up the space for forms of subjectivity that exceed the immanent logic of the previous situation.

To return to a concept I introduced earlier in this chapter, this particular similarity can be seen as a product of both Badiou and Kierkegaard employing a meta-dialectical structure in their ontological projects. As I stated previously, by meta-dialectical I mean a dialectical structure that itself becomes a dialectical opposition between the dialectical and non-dialectical. For both Kierkegaard and Badiou the event, or the instant, is the precise moment at which any dialectical logic becomes meta-dialectical through the introduction of a non-dialectical gap that necessitates decision and activity. This similarity makes clear both of their relations to traditional readings of Hegel which share a sense of fidelity and critique, as both of them could never have developed their own systems of thought (or theories of subjectivity) if it was not for Hegel, but they equally could never have developed these unique positions if they were not willing to move beyond a traditional reading of Hegel. In both cases, they seem to introduce the meta-dialectical moment to move beyond the immanent logic of closure at play in Hegel's philosophy.

Finally, and maybe most contentiously, Kierkegaard and Badiou share in common the foundational role of the formal logic of Christianity in both of their projects. As I previously outlined, Badiou uses the structure of the death and resurrection of Christ as his primary example for the structure of the event and the Apostle Paul as his paradigmatic example of subjectivity. While Badiou makes it clear that he is nothing if not a radically militant atheist who believes that Christianity is nothing more than a fable, as opposed to Kierkegaard's emphasis on actual Christian

belief, this does not change the fact that they both have formal accounts of ontology and subjectivity which are deeply shaped by the structure of Christian truth and subjectivity.

In particular, both Badiou and Kierkegaard utilize Christian versions of notions such as grace, hope, love and faith. As Badiou argues in *Saint Paul*, “Faith would be the opening to the true; love, the universalizing effectiveness of its trajectory; hope, lastly, a maxim enjoining us to persevere in this trajectory.”³²⁴ So we see him utilizing classically Christian concepts to articulate his own theory of subjectivity in which faith is thus the manner by which the subject is able to experience the occurrence of the true, love is the fact that the trajectory opened by the happening of truth is universal in that no one is excluded from participation in its consequences, and hope is what enables subjectivity to persevere in the working out of the consequences of a particular trajectory. Along with this we have seen that Badiou even goes so far as to rely on a materialist notion of grace to account for the fact that a human animal is capable of feeling the affects accompanying the occurrence of the event.

5.8 Kierkegaard *contra* Badiou

Before moving on to argue for why Badiou (and contemporary materialism as a whole) *needs* Kierkegaard, it is helpful to return to the distinction Badiou has already drawn between the two contemporary paths on what he calls ‘the adventure of French philosophy’. As I have already outlined, one of these he refers to as philosophies of concept (formalism) and the other he refers to as philosophies of life (vitalism). As it pertains to the question of subjectivity I find it helpful to refer to the latter as providing an internal account of subjectivity, while the former provides a wholly external account of the structure of subjectivity. In a similar sense, internal accounts of subjectivity provide a picture of a pre-evental form of subjectivity, while external accounts offer a picture of

³²⁴ Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p.91.

post-evental subjectivity. As I have previously stated, the issue with Badiou's theory of subjectivity is an inability to properly account for pre-evental human subjectivity.

These two strands of philosophy, and their accompanying accounts of subjectivity, end up leading to what I have previously referred to as the 'internal/external' problem of subjectivity. In one account we have an emphasis on the life and pathos of the individual that explains why and how the individual experiences moments of passion and desire. This account often fails inasmuch as it avoids giving a structural, or formal account of subjectivity and in particular fails to adequately consider subjectivity as a collective concept. On the other hand, philosophies of concept (or, formalism) can often provide a rigorous systematic account of the structure of subjectivity, but also avoid any account that would bring them back into contact with vitalism or humanism. As I outlined previously in this chapter, we can see this tension emerge by observing the development of Badiou's theory of subjectivity over the course of his three major works.

In light of Badiou's theory of subjectivity this distinction leaves us with a quite simple question; what is it about the structure of the individual human being that makes it receptive to the happening of a truth and subsequently allows it to not only deliberate the consequences of this truth but gives it the capacity of actively respond to the consequences of this event through the experience of affects it experiences at the level of emotion or pathos?

Now that I have outlined the development of Badiou's theory of subjectivity and offered an immanent critique of the shortcomings of this theory, I would like to return to my claim that this failure largely has to do with what I have called the internal/external problem. In particular, I will argue that the systematic reading of Kierkegaard offered earlier in this thesis provides a corrective for this problem.

To once again sum up this issue, the problem for Badiou resides precisely in his inability to provide a systematic account of the manner in which particularly human consciousness is capable of

responding to external events in a volitional manner which involves both the internalization of a truth and the external response to this truth through collective activity. Much of this has to do with Badiou's apprehension to utilize any neurobiological or psychological account of human subjectivity or an equally problematic phenomenological account of consciousness.

Kierkegaard avoids this problem by offering a theory of human consciousness which accounts for both the *internal* operations of freedom, individual subjectivity, relationality and an *external* account of the manner in which these individuals are then able to relate to both external events and other individuals, all the while maintaining the freedom at the heart of the subject. The important point here is that in an idealist fashion, the same structure repeats itself at the level of the individual and the social and there is thus no absolute separation between the internal becoming of the self from the becoming of an outward social collective. I will once again sum up this entire movement, paying particular attention in this instance to the way in which my systematic reading of Kierkegaard corrects the internal/external problem in the work of Badiou.

I began this thesis with an explication of the first moment of the becoming of the self in its first moment of absolute negation (*sin*) as it attempted to ground itself with no reference to any objective or external force. We then saw that this initial moment of negation leads the subject to the experience of anxiety as it becomes aware of the abyss of freedom at the heart of its own experience of, and relation to, reality. This anxiety emerges in the same cracks, or gaps, that produce the freedom characterizing the self. This foundational fracture, between subject and object, carries over into the very structure of the self. At this point we can easily see how Sartre built his theory of the *pour-soi* (for it-self) and *en-soi* (in-itself) aspects of consciousness upon Kierkegaard's characterization of the self. This fracture at the heart of reality and the self thus ensure the primary place of freedom at both levels, the sort of freedom Badiou himself aims to ground mathematically through his own set theoretical ontology.

I then outlined the further development of Kierkegaard's theory of subjectivity through the development of an anthropological picture of human subjectivity in *SUD*. In this text we see the further dialectical development of the self as it moves from its break with immediacy into a reflection grounded in the contradictions at the heart of the self. These contradictions are between the infinite and finite and the possible and the necessary, the subjective and the objective aspects of consciousness. Through this analysis it becomes clear that for Kierkegaard the self is only properly itself when it relates *to* itself and this capacity for relation is the product of the primary fracture previously described. The self when properly relational is thus capable of appropriating and religiously relating to an idea or cause outside of itself and through faith is capable of overcoming the despair created by the uncertainty of the future.

Kierkegaard builds on the relational structure of the self that is offered in *SUD* in its accompanying volume, *PC*, in which his discussion of the church exemplifies the manner in which the previously outlined ontology and anthropology operate on the social level. This is accomplished through the contrast of the militant church and the triumphant church. While the later is characterized by objective certainty, a taste for reflection and no necessity of continued negotiation or faithful activity, the former is characterized by an anxious relationship to the freedom at the core of reality and the relation of the collective body to truth and individuals to each other always exists in the light of the fact that the religious signifies the 'possibility of possibility.' In light of this, free subjectivity is at the heart of any collective organization of individuals, as truth is something to be subjectively appropriated and not abstractly agreed upon. Truth is thus something to be done in a process of continued actualization, not something to merely be known in a reflective manner.

This last point is in clear proximity to Badiou (and the later Sartre's) militancy, because for Kierkegaard truth is something that must be faithfully and militantly affirmed by the subject at every juncture. This is why Badiou himself relies overtly on Kierkegaard's own concepts when developing

his theory of points, a theory which emphasizes the necessity for the subject to constantly repeat their initial moment of affirmation of a truth in a continuous process of appropriation and affirmation. This is a process that seems to be uniquely human and thus a process that is dependent on a certain theorization of the human that goes beyond the 'human animal' and becomes 'immortal.'

To put it in more concise terms, Kierkegaard offers a conceptual structure that is capable of providing a crucial corrective to the internal/external problem currently plaguing much of contemporary European materialism and is particularly exemplified in Badiou's theory of subjectivity. As I stated previously, Badiou fails to account for the manner in which a human animal, which is not yet a subject, is able to feel the affects brought about by an event and then respond to these affects by willfully joining a collective subject-body. Thus he provides a purely formal account of the structure of external subjectivity but fails to explain why the individual, internal subject has a structure capable of allowing it to be incorporated into a subject body. As we have seen, the best he can do is offer the theological trope of grace to explain this process. It is ironic on this crucial point that Badiou, the militant atheist, falls into theological supernaturalism more so than Kierkegaard, the Christian thinker, does.

I would now like to outline once again, in even more formal terms, the manner by which Kierkegaard seems to offer a structure by which we can think of a contemporary model for a theory that can account for internal, external and collective subjectivity. In the first respect, Kierkegaard offers us a more rigorous theorization of the internal structure of what Badiou refers to as the human animal, which we can equally think of as the pre-subjective individual human being. While Badiou's subject does not become immortal until she encounters the void in a situation through the grace of the event, Kierkegaard's subject already encounters this void as the fracture marking the structure of her own subjectivity. This inconsistency in the very structure of the self is precisely what opens up the space for spirit to develop in freedom as the relation of opposed aspects of the self.

This internal account of subjectivity thus creates the grounds for a subject capable of not only freely reflecting on possibility, but more importantly, capable of making decisions which then lead to a subsequent willed activity.

Once he establishes a theory of properly internal (and relational) subjectivity that explains how the self relates to itself, Kierkegaard is able to extrapolate this structure to the level of externality. So while the foundation of my own subjectivity involves my encounter with a lack of ground, or fracture, at the heart of my own consciousness that leads me to actively choosing to become myself in an act of faith, this internal act is what allows me to choose external acts as well. In this sense it is not just the case that the structure of the self is inherently self-relating, but it is also the case that the structure of relation applies to my relations to both other individuals and to external ideas. The same fracture, which opens up the possibility of my self-relation, is precisely what allows me to make a decision to faithfully commit to something external.

Now that I have outlined the manner in which Kierkegaard accounts for both the internal and external structure of subjectivity, we can now once again reiterate the manner in which this paves the way for theorizing collective subjectivity as the inter-relation of those who are passionately related to the same ideas. This helps exemplify how a group of individuals participating in a collective form of subjectivity oriented around a common idea (or, event) is still a dynamic and relational structure. Along with this, it gives us a way to theorize the manner in which subjects are able to relate to others, as their relations are meditated through the idea (or, event) they share a relation to. So while Badiou theorizes a form of subjectivity in which those participating in the construction of a new world in the wake of an event are conflated into one collective body, for Kierkegaard those participating in a collective form of subjectivity still maintain their dynamic nature as spirit, and this dynamic relation carries over into the relations between the individuals participating in a group. We can see this when he points out two contrary forms of tension in "The

Present Age', in one sense a positive form of tension is that which keeps the forces of life elastic and enthusiastic and on the other hand there is a negative form of tension in which enthusiasm and inwardness are lost and instead, envy becomes a negative unifying principle (*TA* 80-81).

Thus, in relation to what I have referred to as the lack of an internal account of pre-evental subjectivity in the work of Badiou, I am here utilizing Kierkegaard to argue for the existence of a form of *ur*-subjectivity which necessarily precedes any particular external form of subjectivity which is characterized by the transition from a human animal to a subject-of-truth.³²⁵ As I have stated previously, Badiou fails to say what it is about the human animal which allows it to externally respond to internally felt affects which occur with the happening of an event. Following the model outlined by Kierkegaard (or more precisely, by my creative re-interpretation of Kierkegaard) we can see that Badiou fails to theorize the manner in which the human animal has the capacity to respond to, and subsequently be related to, external ideas and events.

Along with this we see that Badiou fails to provide any adequate account of the individual subject, or more precisely, fails to account for the possibility of a form of subjectivity that operates on the individual level. Badiou believes that by not providing a formal account of individual subjectivity he avoids some of the trappings of philosophies grounded in theories of phenomenal consciousness or individual life, but he loses far more than he gains. By avoiding any sort of philosophical anthropology or humanism, he constructs a practical, or political, philosophy completely dependent on human activity and the responses of individual human beings to trans-individual events while not providing any positive account of the internal structure of the individual human being that this system is so dependent on. At this point Badiou seems to make the same

³²⁵ It is worth noting that there are contemporary philosophers attempting to provide an account of internal subjectivity that has a similar structure. In particular the recent work of Adrian Johnston and Catherine Malabou can be seen as utilizing both psychoanalysis and neuroscience to attempt to provide a dialectical and materialist account of internal, or neural, subjectivity. See in particular, *Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and Neuroscience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

mistake that Kierkegaard accuses the Danish Hegelians of by forgetting the single individual and allowing her to get swallowed up into the system of conceptual thought. If Badiou is at his most Kierkegaardian by constructing a philosophy centered around truth, human subjectivity and contingency, he is at his most traditionally Hegelian when he avoids providing any account of the unique capacities of individual human beings. This is especially problematic if much of what Badiou aims to accomplish with his philosophy is inspiring individual human beings to either take up the project of emancipatory politics or reconsider the truth contained in the practice of traditional forms of love.³²⁶

³²⁶ See Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love* trans. Peter Bush (New York: New Press, 2012)

Conclusion

Kierkegaard for the 21st Century?

While I have just utilized my account of Kierkegaard's philosophical project to critique one of the major problems haunting Badiou's materialist philosophy, the question remains, is it really worth attempting to provide a materialist account of Kierkegaard's work? Along with this one could also ask, if the aim is to move beyond a phenomenological, theological or existential account, why not attempt to offer a naturalist reading? The project of developing a naturalist interpretation of Kierkegaard's project has recently been developed by Alison Assiter, who in her work *Kierkegaard, Metaphysics and Political Theory: Unfinished Selves* attempts to develop a naturalist reading of Kierkegaard's conception of the self for the sake of responding to recent liberal political accounts of the self.³²⁷ While I have obvious sympathies with this project, I am favoring a materialist account over a naturalist account due to some of the latent issues with the concept of nature itself. This is important not only due to the problems inherent to theorizing nature, but also due to a recent tendency in Kierkegaard scholarship to attempt to argue that Kierkegaard himself is an essentially supernaturalist thinker.³²⁸ In response to the tendencies to read Kierkegaard as either a naturalist or as a supernaturalist, I would like to play off the title of a recent article by Adrian Johnston by responding that if the only two options by which we can interpret Kierkegaard are as a naturalist or as a supernaturalist that, 'no, thanks --- both are worse!'³²⁹

In light of this, I think a contemporary account of materialism, in which materialism is precisely the assertion that matter is non-all and still in a contingent process of development, avoids

³²⁷ Alison Assiter, *Kierkegaard, Metaphysics and Political Theory: Unfinished Selves* (London: Continuum, 2009).

³²⁸ This view is concisely outlined in Jamie Turnbull's essay 'Why Kierkegaard Matters Not to Philosophy' which is available online: http://www.academia.edu/1670192/_Why_Kierkegaard_Matters_Not_to_Philosophy_

³²⁹ I am here playing off the title of Adrian Johnston's paper 'Naturalism or Anti-Naturalism? No, thanks -- Both are worse!' in *La Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, special issue: "On Slavoj Žižek," pp: 321-346

some of the dangers of the attempt to say that a particular form of subjectivity, consciousness or activity is natural, or supernatural, as such. Along with this, I stand halfway between the perspective of Badiou and Catherine Malabou, for whom the natural sciences are a crucial resource for contemporary philosophical materialism.³³⁰ With Malabou I agree that there is no longer any excuse for philosophy to not consider the recent developments in neurobiology in our considerations of the nature of the structure of subjectivity; while at the same time acknowledging with Badiou that often the natural sciences can carry their own dogmatic baggage into the systematic attempts of philosophy.

One of the first steps here is to simply analyze what Kierkegaard already has in common with contemporary materialist philosophy, or more precisely, the ways in which Kierkegaard seems to have already prefigured many of the crucial conceptual aspects of transcendental materialism. First, Kierkegaard's project can be regarded as a critical response to post-Kantian idealism that at the same time relies on the systematic structure of idealist philosophy. As we have seen, two of his primary problems with idealism are both the lack of emphasis on willed subjectivity and its claims to systematic, and logical, completion. In response to this Kierkegaard wants to place a renewed emphasis on the contingency of both reality and subjectivity itself, two of the shared critiques offered by contemporary transcendental materialism. This privileging of contingency (or, events) over laws at the ontological level is what subsequently allows for an emphasis on human freedom at the level of actual subjective existence. Moving beyond Badiou's formalist axiomatics, the recent work by Johnston and Malabou tries to account for this freedom at the neurobiological level.³³¹

Kierkegaard attempts throughout his corpus to argue that the unique activity of subjectivity can never simply be reduced to objective or determinist forces, and this attempt to rigorously defend

³³⁰ See in particular, Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With our Brain?* trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

³³¹ See Adrian Johnston and Catherine Malabou, *Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Neuroscience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013)

free human subjectivity is one of the orienting axioms behind transcendental materialism. For this particular brand of materialism, the aim is to provide an account of subjectivity that emerges from a wholly material basis but is characterized by a freedom that is irreducible to its material basis. Thus freedom is the ‘except that’ which goes beyond bodies, languages and immanent material structures. In this case I am claiming that my materialist re-articulation of Kierkegaard’s project makes possible a materialist theorization of human subjectivity that does not reduce this phenomenon to some necessary material substance or process while also not grounding the activity of free subjectivity in some theological or quasi-mystical form of transcendent otherness.

What is the *Matter* of God?

One final question that may still remain is, what about God? Is it really possible to develop an interpretation of an overtly religious thinker that attempts to build a systematic structure that is both materialist *and* immanent? The other question that could be posed at this point is: what is so unique about a materialist re-interpretation of the religious project of Kierkegaard, or put differently, how does this reading differ from the contemporary materialist philosophies I have been discussing thus far in this chapter?

I will start with the latter question. One of the babies that seem to have been thrown out with the conceptual bathwater is any positive notion of the particularly human in contemporary materialist philosophies. In the reaction against phenomenological and vitalist accounts of life, many formalist philosophies (such as the one developed by Badiou) have attempted to develop a system of philosophical materialism that aims at a rigorous anti-humanism, or at least a serious indifference to the particularly human. Much of this anti-humanism rightly comes from a desire to avoid any hierarchical (and often theological) account that places human thought as somehow ‘above’ the rest of reality in a traditionally metaphysical fashion. I have already shown the way in which the lingering

affects of this anti-humanist tendency have led to various contradictions in Badiou's own philosophy and theory of subjectivity.

We can see another one of the dangerous tendencies of contemporary materialism in the work of Adrian Johnston.³³² While Johnston wholly endorses a theory of transcendental materialism that builds directly upon the work of both Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, he differs from the former set of thinkers by being absolutely anti-religious in his philosophical orientation. This is not to say that Badiou or Žižek are religious in any theological sense of the term, but simply that both acknowledge the structural significance of various forms of religious thought for their theories of subjectivity. As opposed to this Johnston goes a step further than Badiou, who acknowledges his rigorous atheism while still acknowledging the structural and systematic importance of Christianity, by not only acknowledging a radical atheist axiom to his philosophical project, but by also refusing to entertain the idea that religion (and Christianity in particular) can be useful in the development of any sort of materialist philosophy and theory of subjectivity. This can be seen in his repeated critiques of the use of religious and theological tropes in the work of Žižek, a thinker he otherwise endorses almost completely. On the other hand, and unlike Badiou, Johnston does argue for the significance of considering the role of the human in contemporary materialist philosophy and has gone to some length to attempt to articulate a theory of subjectivity that can account for both internal and emotional life and an external theory of political subjectivity.

This sets up an interesting dichotomy, as Badiou leaves room for something like a materialist philosophy of religion, but leaves absolutely no room for a materialist theory of the human. On the other hand, Johnston is fine with claiming that contemporary materialism is at the point at which it can openly acknowledge the human (and even goes as far as to say that it is time for materialists and humanists to unite), but argues that anything resembling a philosophy of religion or theology is

³³² See 'Adrian Johnston's Reply to Clayton Crockett's Review of His Book', *Political Theology* 11.1 (2010), pp.158-160.

absolutely useless and even harmful to the project of developing a contemporary materialist theory of subjectivity.

In opposition to both Badiou and Johnston, a materialist re-articulation of the project of Kierkegaard allows us to hold onto a certain conception of humanism (which is not hierarchical in any sort of theological sense) while at the same time offering a manner by which to consider the religious in materialist terms that do not *a priori* invalidate the material significance of religious belief and practice. This reading not only enables us to consider Kierkegaard as a resource for thinking about the structure of human subjectivity in a materialist context, but also allows us to see how the structure of the fractured dialectic serves as a crucial point of connection between 19th century German idealist philosophy and 21st century European materialist philosophy.

By considering Kierkegaard's theorization of God in a materialist fashion we end up with a way of avoiding the dichotomy of either a militantly atheist naturalism in which religion and the theological are wholly false and meaningless to rigorous philosophical discourse, or on the other hand, a mystical use of religion in which God stands for our inability to grasp any form of truth about metaphysical structure or human subjectivity. Put differently, this materialist rendering of God (and the religious) does not fall into the traps of the 'god of the gaps' argument in which the theological is inserted for the sake of accounting for explanatory gaps in our rational understanding of reality. Rather, this materialist interpretation makes God the very matter of these ontological gaps themselves. Put differently, rather than the religious signifying our response to explanatory gaps in human cognition and epistemological limitations, the possibility of the religious is a product of the ontological gaps that create the space for the emergence of free human subjectivity itself. In this sense religious existence is not a reactionary response to epistemological limitation, but is instead a product of a certain fractured ontological condition. Following this we could say that this mode of religious thought is an existential response to the ontological structure outlined in transcendental

materialism. This can bring us back to the discussion of Kierkegaard's understanding of God in *SUD*, in which it is claimed that God is precisely that all things are possible. Because reality is non-all, and marked by fracture and contingency, God signifies the possibility opened up by this non-all ontology, and subsequently the religious has to do with the form of human subjectivity established by the reality of this possibility. Following this, it makes sense to see the manner in which for figures as diverse as Kierkegaard, Martin Luther King Jr. and Alain Badiou, 'another world' is always possible; this other world is never guaranteed but is always a possibility that can only be actualized through the work of willed human subjectivity. Along these same lines, a materialist re-consideration of God allows us to acknowledge that rather than signifying 'another world' which exists beyond the bounds of our phenomenal experience, religion is concerned precisely with the human and the possibility contained in human activity.

At this point of my thesis I have provided a contextual account of the theoretical moves of post-Kantian German idealism, outlined a systematic ontological and anthropological reading of Kierkegaard's philosophical and religious project and used this reading to analyze Kierkegaard's relation to some of the major figures of contemporary European materialist philosophy. Thus far I have shown the manner in which Kierkegaard offers a critique of immediacy (through sin as an absolute negation) and an account of the development and break from reflection that creates the conditions for willed human activity. I then moved on to show the social and political significance of this critique of reflection. To avoid leaving the lingering suspicion that I am merely providing a more rigorous ontological interpretation of traditional existentialism, I will close this work through briefly outlining the third, and final moment of Kierkegaard's ontological structure: *love*. If *The Concept of Anxiety* provides a critique of immediacy and *The Sickness Unto Death* outlines a theory, and critique of, reflection, Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* provides a return to a higher immediacy through the activity of love. This final move is crucial as it not only allows us to re-consider Kierkegaard's

relation to Hegel, for whom love served as one of the motivating forces behind the development of a systematic philosophy, but equally to a figure such as Badiou, for whom love is one of the four ways by which the subject can be inaugurated into a process of truth. Put simply, I will conclude the present thesis through offering a brief outline the manner in which love is precisely the end of philosophy for Kierkegaard, and the beginning of life.

What's Love Got To Do With It?

If Kierkegaard has anything that could be called a 'final moment' in his system, we could say that this is it can be found in his concept of love, primarily as outlined in his *Works of Love*. It is important to note that by final moment I do not mean a moment of final synthesis in which spirit finally returns to its grounds in a moment of rest, but rather, the acceptance of the infinite tension of love's activity. As Kierkegaard writes, "[...] love's element is infinitude, inexhaustibility, immeasurability" (*WL* 180). Love thus has the character of an activity and never of a final moment, or law, which is characteristic of some sort of overarching structure. As Binetti puts it, when offering a reading of Kierkegaard's conception of love in Hegelian logical terms:

Faith unites in this way what sin separates and maintains itself in the dialectical effort of its continuous overcoming. Its certainty affirms equality and Kierkegaard calls love this one and reconciled actuality. What faith believes and supports, that for which it struggles and on which it rests is thus, purely and simply, love.³³³

³³³ Binetti, 'Kierkegaard – Hegel: The Religious Stage in Speculative Terms', p. 112.

Thus the initial fracture experienced by spirit in the moment of sin as absolute negation is reconciled only through the faithful activity of love, which is described by Binetti as an activity of ‘continuous overcoming.’ She goes on to outline the meaning of this sort of love further, writing that:

Love operates an identity, whose difference subsists, although reconciled; it restores a unity in which everything is made equal, but without mixture or confusion.³³⁴

So even though love can be seen as a moment of reconciliation between spirit and the absolute, even in the midst of this moment of reconciliation difference still subsists. Rather than love being that which finally synthesizes the fracture existing between spirit and the absolute, it is instead the affirmation of this fracture and the faithful acknowledgement that love is the activity capable of providing a difference in unity. Love is thus the third through which spirit and the absolute possibility of God can be related. This only serves to re-affirm the dynamic nature of the absolute as previously outlined in chapter three of the present work.

To return to two examples used throughout this thesis, we could think of the way this form of love would operate in both political and romantic terms. Politically, this means that even if one is faithfully committed to a particular political project, there is never a moment of certainty in which the work is finished and a new, stable political reality is created. Rather, in a manner that we have seen outlined in the work of Badiou, a faithful political subject is constantly engaged in the process of reaffirming the consequences of a particular political commitment through acts of repetition. One never leaps once and for all, but must continually affirm that which has shaped their subjectivity and existential project. In romantic terms this means that, for example, a marriage ceremony is never a sort of dialectical synthesis in which two individuals are merged into one monistic romantic entity

³³⁴ Ibid., p. 116.

where difference and tension is abolished. Rather, they are only beginning a dynamic process of working out the consequences of love through affirming their identity through difference. The amorous affirmation that shaped their subjectivity must be re-affirmed through a lifetime of repetition. The fracture faced at the initial moment of negation (in sin) still remains, but love is the activity capable of faithfully existing in the midst of this fractured abyss.

Kierkegaard emphasizes the active nature of love when he writes:

What love does, that it is; what it is, that it does – at one and the same moment. At the same moment it goes out of itself (the outward direction), it is in itself (the inward direction); and at the same moment it is in itself, it goes out of itself in such a way that this outward going and this returning, this returning and this outward going are simultaneously one and the same (*WL* 280).

We here see that love is never a stable concept or identity, but always an activity that affects the inward while acting outwardly and vice versa. Kierkegaard describes this process in more succinct terms when he states, “[...] the one who loves is or becomes what he does” (*WL* 281). Love is thus an activity that is intricately involved with the task of subjectivity.

Love is not an abandonment of the attempt at a systematic account, but rather, love is both the foundation and the end goal of Kierkegaard’s ‘system’. In Hegelian terms, love is both the immediate and the higher immediacy arrived at through the journey of the self from the negation of objectivity in sin, to the despair of reflection, to the leap of faith which enables the self to participate in the process of the works of love.

The fractured dialectic underlying Kierkegaard’s theory of subjectivity is thus not primarily concerned with providing a logical account of reality and the structure of the self, but rather, with

showing that the fracture at the heart of reality, and the self, opens up the possibility for faith, hope and love. Not faith in a necessarily transcendent divine ‘other’, but a faith in our ability to become ourselves in the midst of fracture and contradiction. Hope not in a world to come, but hope in the ability of humanity to decisively change this world in the here and now. And love not as a sort of romantic unity, but precisely as the consistency of inconsistency and the holding together of two opposed elements. This fractured dialectic does not begin with the actual for the sake of arriving at a stable ideal, but rather, leads one from the immediacy of the actual to the possibility of activity. Kierkegaard does not provide us with a framework for ‘doing’ systematic philosophy; rather, he provides us with a system which shows precisely where philosophy ends and the task of subjective activity begins.

At this point the stakes of this thesis should be clear. Through a reading of Kierkegaard’s philosophical project which places his work against the backdrop of the major figures and themes of post-Kantian German idealism, a unique ontological position emerges which I have referred to as a fractured dialectic. This ontology of fracture differs from a traditionally conceived account of dialectics in that rather than presupposing any primordially monistic unity it instead posits that a primordial fracture, or gap, characterizes the very structure of reality and subjectivity. This enables us to conceive of what has been referred to in this thesis as a meta-dialectics, as the dialectical movement itself has the potential to dialectically oscillate between the dialectical and non-dialectical. This non-dialectical space of fracture serves as the basis for an account of freedom at both the ontological and subjective level.

I then moved on to outline the manner in which the ontology of fracture lays the groundwork for Kierkegaard’s account of the subject, in which this fractured structure is repeated at the level of consciousness. This provides an account of the self in which subjective freedom is made possible by the cracks and gaps in the ontological structure of reality itself. In this way subjective

freedom is not the outcome of any sort of epistemological gap between the phenomenal subject and noumenal reality, rather, the gaps and fractures in reality *itself* is what creates the empty space for the free activity of human subjectivity. If the previously discussed ontological break with any supposedly consistent immediacy is what leads to the experience of anxiety, the subject's attempt to resolve the dialectical contradictions which haunt their own consciousness is what leads to Kierkegaard's analysis of despair.

After outlining this fractured dialectical ontology and theory of subjectivity I moved on to argue for the political relevance of this theory, something that is rarely attributed to the religious authorship of Kierkegaard. Rather than outlining any sort of prescriptive political philosophy as such, I built upon this fractured dialectic to show the way in which this can allow us to theorize the ontological grounds of political possibility and the forms of political subjectivity made possible through these conditions. Rather than a political philosophy or theory, I argued that in Kierkegaard we have what can be properly considered a political ontology. This political ontology built a further link in the fractured dialectical chain by showing how the same meta-dialectical tension existing at the levels of the ontological and the subjective repeats at the level of social and political relations. In this way, individuals never simply collapse into political collectives but remain in a constant tension with themselves, other members of the collective and the ideas that orient their political activity. In this way the particularity of human freedom exists in a productive tension with a collective group oriented around a common political idea.

Finally, I showed the manner in which this new interpretation of Kierkegaard bears a direct relationship to many of the ontological and political concerns of contemporary European materialist philosophy. Along with seeming to in many ways pre-figure the conceptual developments of recent materialist philosophies (and in particular those associated with transcendental materialism), this fractured dialectical account of Kierkegaard's authorship provides crucial correctives to some of the

problems plaguing recent materialist thought. In particular, I used the political ontology developed in chapter four to critique the lack of a proper account of the individual human subject in the work of French philosopher Alain Badiou. This materialist interpretation allowed me to use a 19th century philosophical reading of Kierkegaard to argue for his continued relevance to 21st century political and ontological debates.

The implications of this interpretation for Kierkegaard scholarship should be fairly clear. My reading offers good reason to re-consider his relationship to German idealist philosophy (and in particular figures such as Fichte and Schelling), his undervalued political potential and his relevance to contemporary debates in European materialist philosophy. Subsequently, this reading contributes to other recent scholarship that also argues for the necessity of a consideration of Kierkegaard's authorship in the philosophical context of 19th century European philosophy. My reading differs from these accounts, however, precisely inasmuch as I am emphasizing not merely the historical but the ontological relationship between Kierkegaard and the German idealist, and along with this, am building upon this reading to argue for the direct relevance of Kierkegaard's work to contemporary debates in ontology and the political. According to my reading, Kierkegaardian categories such as anxiety, despair, faith and love are not merely religious tropes that lay the groundwork for a religious anti-philosophy paving the way for 20th century European existentialism. Rather, these categories are significant conceptual repetitions of many of the key tropes of German idealist philosophy that carry serious ontological weight while also placing a unique emphasis on the activity of free human subjectivity. Following this reading, one would have to seriously question the tenability of any future work which attempted to consider Kierkegaard to be a merely religious, or existentialist, thinker who lacked any relevance to ontological and political debates. If the reading offered in this thesis is correct, Kierkegaard must now not only be considered a properly 19th century philosopher, but paradoxically, a properly 21st century philosophical voice.

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